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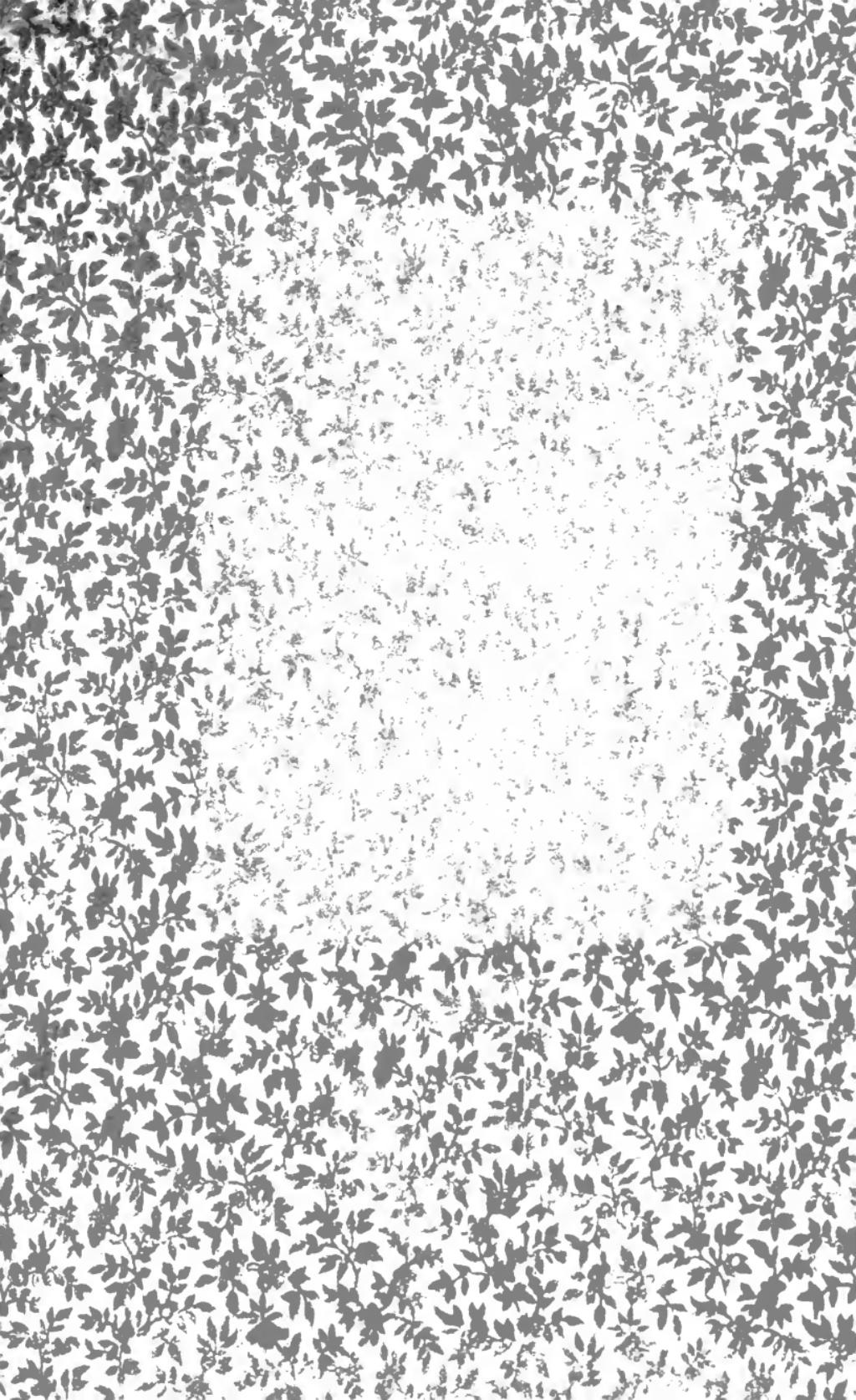
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John R. Anderson.



THE
PIT TOWN CORONET:

A Family Mystery.

BY
CHARLES J. WILLS,
AUTHOR OF
IN THE LAND OF THE LION AND SUN," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

WARD AND DOWNEY,
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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—AFTER SEVENTEEN YEARS	1
II.—AT MONTE CARLO	25
III.—AN ANONYMOUS LETTER	52
IV.—PALLIDA MORS	76
V.—A LITTLE RED BOX	100
VI.—LUCIUS HAGGARD IS BEWILDERED	131
VII.—ENTER MR. BROOKES	158
VIII.—THE HOLLOW BEECH TREE	179
IX.—MR. CAPT LEAVES SERVICE	203

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THE PIT TOWN CORONET.



THE PIT TOWN CORONET.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER SEVENTEEN YEARS.

SEVENTEEN uneventful years had passed and had streaked Georgie Haggard's abundant chestnut locks with grey. A lovely woman still. The innocent, healthful, girlish beauty had developed into the sweet matronly dignity which is so frequently seen among the happy wives and mothers of the English aristocracy. Haggard was still proud of his wife, because even he couldn't fail to see her beauty; and as for the old lord, he idolized her much as old Squire Warrender had idolized her twenty years ago at The Warren. Georgie Haggard was not demonstrative. Always quiet, she was

rather timid and subdued in her husband's presence ; but with the old lord, though perhaps a little more staid and dignified than of yore, she was still the lovely and affectionate woman of the old happy times. Hers was the beauty of the happy mother, the sweet matronly loveliness which is perhaps the more touching when tinged by the slight dash of sadness which idealises it and saves it from the commonplace. The smile was not ever present, but it was none the less beautiful and touching from its rarity.

Reginald Haggard and his family had been installed at Walls End Castle ever since Lord Hetton's death. They had come originally upon a visit ; Mrs. Haggard's health had suddenly broken down, and at the old lord's urgent entreaty the visit had been indefinitely prolonged. Although Haggard was, as we know, a wealthy man, he could not afford to disregard any suggestion of his great-uncle. At first he had looked

on the whole thing as a confounded nuisance ; he had objected to his wife that they might make themselves ridiculous by a too abject obedience to the whims of the old nobleman.

But after all it was not so very bad for the Haggards. Lord Pit Town took care to make it very apparent to everybody that it was at his special desire that Haggard and his family remained at the Castle. He let it be very plainly perceived that he considered Reginald Haggard almost as his son, as well as his heir ; for the permanent under-secretary at the Home Office, at the conclusion of his official duties, had quite enough to occupy his mind with his eternal whist at the club till the small hours of the morning. The odd trick was far more to him than the possession of Walls End Castle and the Pit Town title. But Mr. Lancelot Haggard remained a plain esquire till his death, which occurred seven years after that of

the unfortunate Lord Hetton. When his man-servant opened the study door one morning, for he had found the bedroom empty, he saw Lancelot Haggard seated at the whist table, upon which the four hands of an unfinished game were spread. Pole's "Treatise on Whist" lay open at "The Echo of the Call," the candles had burnt out in their sockets, there were tricks turned, and three cards were already played of another one; and Lancelot Haggard sat bolt upright, the fourth card between his fingers, stone dead, but with a peaceful smile upon his lips.

Reginald Haggard, then, was practically in the position of Lord Pit Town's son. Of course he was but plain Mr. Haggard still. He had got rid of his father's place, thus "washing his hands," as he had threatened, "of the whole bag of tricks;" for though Cunningham, the Scotch steward, had succeeded in screwing three per cent. out of the place, yet he

had made himself so terribly unpopular in the process that he resigned in despair in order to emigrate to New Zealand, and so become, as he phrased it, his “ain mon again.” When the steward resigned Haggard had been very glad indeed of the excuse to send the place to the hammer. A set of rooms in the huge mansion of the old lord in Grosvenor Square had been placed at Haggard’s disposal, and though he frequently ran up to town, his *pied-à-terre* was at the house which would one day be his own, and the Haggards had no regular establishment in London. As for Georgie Haggard herself, she invariably passed a portion of the summer with her father at The Warren. She usually made her annual visit accompanied only by the two boys, for Haggard invariably absented himself in the summer either for Norway fishing, lengthy yacht voyages, or as one of a little party of men of his own kidney, who sought their sport further

afield and went lion-hunting in South Africa, shooting the hippopotamus on the White Nile, or chasing the fast-disappearing buffalo upon the American prairies. But as a rule he would get home for the shooting. Year by year the head of game in the Walls End preserves, under Haggard's fostering care, had increased. In the old lord's name Haggard had invited every year a select little party of crack shots; he gave them a couple of days' *battue* shooting, the other four in the stubble and among the turnips, and at the end of the week they went away to "wipe each others' eyes" over some other man's birds. For some years the bags made at these little annual gatherings had been noted in the daily papers. Haggard himself not infrequently headed the list, for he was an enthusiastic sportsman and a brilliant shot.

Reginald Haggard at five-and-forty had quieted down. Years and years ago he had taken his name off the books at the

Pandemonium ; he no longer gambled, and he took a great interest in politics, as became a man who was destined, in the ordinary course of events, and at no very distant date, to become one of our hereditary legislators. Of course Haggard had many friends, or rather acquaintances, all of whom were ready to kootoo and truckle to the man who would be the next Earl of Pit Town ; men whom he would invite to dinner, and who would entertain him ; generally men of his own age, or club-room bucks with wrinkled cheeks ; men whose clothes were always in the fashion, and who as a rule ate and drank rather more than was good for them ; men who rode in the park on three hundred guinea hacks, and who might be seen in the Drive in big mail-phaetons with brobdignagian lamps, or driving noisy and rather miscellaneous parties on their four-in-hands towards Richmond.

I don't know what Haggard would have

done without that invaluable esquire of his body, Mr. Maurice Capt. Capt accompanied him everywhere; he had camped out with him in the Rockies, and his culinary skill there had more than made up for the deficiencies of Bull-headed Bill, the half-bred titular cook of the expedition. Capt was a silent man, and his fellow servants were never able to extract any gossip from him respecting his master's wanderings. But Haggard was lucky in retaining one real friend; his old *fidus Achates*, Lord Spunyarn, was his friend still; still a bachelor, no longer the unsuccessful amateur athlete of former days, but developed into a full-blown philanthropist, the friend of mankind in general, but of the destitute East-ender in particular.

Ever since Georgie Haggard, in her just indignation, had banished her cousin from her presence, Miss Lucy Warrender, still a handsome woman, had led a wandering life; the dove had found no rest for the

sole of her foot. Homeless and friendless, though her intimates and acquaintances were innumerable, she was as restless and erratic in her movements as the Wandering Jew. Miss Warrender was always in evidence upon the Ascot Lawn; she was to be seen at Brighton during the season, at German watering-places, at Deauville, Biarritz, and Eastbourne or Scarborough in the summer, and occasionally even for a few days at The Warren, where she invariably appeared at Christmas. For Lucy Warrender had eight hundred a year of her own, which she had inherited from the colonel, her father. I am afraid she had become a confirmed old maid; she had flirted and philandered till she was thirty, and there were plenty of the very smartest people who were quite ready to flirt with her now, for Lucy Warrender still retained her good looks, her dreamy blonde beauty, and her eyes still sparkled as of old. We have said Lucy Warrender was homeless

and friendless, and she had developed two master vices: to drown her troubles she gambled as only a woman can gamble, and she drugged herself with chloral and other abominations to procure a temporary forgetfulness of a black shadow that incessantly pursued her. The man Capt knew of the long-buried secret, and he persistently blackmailed the unhappy Lucy Warrender; but Capt was far too wise a man to kill the goose with the golden eggs. He considered that if he drove her to extremity, and the trick which had been played upon Reginald Haggard should ever become a public scandal, that he had nothing to gain but everything to lose. He knew that the English laws against what the French call *chantage* were severe; he also knew enough of his master to be quite certain that if Haggard's just indignation were once aroused, he would be pursued with relentless ferocity. So he contented himself with plundering Lucy Warrender,

and kept her secret ; not because he was not perfectly ready to betray it, but because he saw no way of bringing his knowledge to a better market.

As for the two young men, for they had already ceased to be adolescents, they were certainly physically decidedly above the average. Lucius, the elder, was, as we know, Lucy Warrender's child. His whole soul was wrapped up in the fact that a few short years would see him the possessor of the courtesy title and heir to his supposed father's ample means and old Lord Pit Town's incalculable wealth. The young fellow had even developed a taste for art, simply because he felt it was his bounden duty to be able to appreciate the innumerable treasures which must inevitably soon be his very own. Young Lucius Haggard had been petted and spoiled from his earliest infancy, he had had his way in everything ; his nurses, his schoolmasters and his tutors had bowed down to him ;

good-looking young fellow that he became in after years, a fact of which he was perfectly aware; he was flattered and toadied to by the golden youth of both sexes, and by most of his elders, who ought to have known better, to an extent sufficient to have turned the head of any ordinary young man of well-regulated mind. But Lucius Haggard's was not a well-regulated mind. He was of his father's religion, but he carried the religion further. Reginald Haggard was a self-worshipper, a man determined to get the greatest amount of pleasure and amusement out of this world, regardless of consequences to others, a man for whom trumps were continually turning up, a man who felt he was a brazen pot among the earthen ones floating down the stream, and to whom the annihilation of the weaker vessels was a matter of utter indifference. Like Napoleon, he believed in his star, and he had been right in doing so, for when at two-and-twenty he had

been turned out to take his chance, he had rapidly become the possessor of wealth far beyond his needs; a little later, after a short period of enjoyment of the free wild life in America, he had returned to draw the prize in the matrimonial lottery, which somehow inevitably falls to the lot of such as he. The good lives which stood between him and the Pit Town peerage had all dropped, and nothing now remained between him and what he considered his rights but one frail old man. But the young Lucius had never for an instant been submitted to the healthy influence of even temporary poverty, his existence had never even been troubled by so much as a crumpled rose leaf; the consequence was that his selfishness was utter and unaffected, that he did not even wear it as a garment, but that it was absolutely a part of himself. A tall handsome young fellow enough, fairly clever, who did not conceal that he thought himself rather superior to the rest

of the world, and the rest of the world took pretty good care to coincide in the young fellow's opinion.

As for George Haggard, he was the anti-type of Lucius. Equally good-looking, he was the picture of old Squire Warrender in his youth; his fair chestnut hair curled in profusion over his broad square forehead. He was a muscular youth who shone at school and at the university, in the cricket field and upon the river alike. But he was no mere athlete, for he had a taste for reading, and he never forgot the fact, which his father was continually pressing upon his mind, that he, as a younger son, would have to get his own living. And George Haggard was ambitious; he meant if possible to force his way into the arena of political life, and had already determined to make a struggle for name and fame at the Bar. But though George Haggard was ambitious, his was an affectionate disposition; he idolized his mother,

and he truckled to no one, not even to his father or the old earl. George Haggard knew well enough that he would be a comparatively poor man—a pauper, as his brother pleasantly put it, but only a pauper from the point of view of Lucius Haggard, the probable future possessor of immense wealth, for The Warren acres would assuredly be his, and had George Haggard so willed it, nothing would have been easier for him than to sit and twiddle his thumbs and wait for old Squire Warrender's death; but as we have said, George Haggard was ambitious.

The great new gallery at Walls End Castle, the Grecian temple which Dr. Wolff had designed over twenty years before, was now less offensive to the eye externally. It was a Grecian temple still, but its spick-and-spanness had passed away. Two old gentlemen arm-in-arm slowly walked down the principal saloon, the one a big grey-haired man whose face was disfigured with

many scars; as he walked he gesticulated, and he spoke with a strong German accent in a loud voice. By his side ambled his friend and companion of many years, a very old man this, who stooped considerably and leant frequently upon a crutch-handle stick; the two men were John, Earl of Pit Town, and Dr. Wolff.

“I never thought, Wolff, that I should be spared to fill the last space on these walls. I certainly never expected to see the termination of my labours. In art one cannot be too exacting. We made up our minds years ago that there should be nothing doubtful here, and here is the only remaining space filled at last, and filled, as it should be, by a masterpiece. Yes,” said the old nobleman, as he rubbed his hands, “thank heaven there is nothing doubtful here. Nothing remains for me now, Wolff, but to leave the treasures that it has been the labour of my life to accumulate; my sight isn’t what it was.”

“No man is what he was, my good friend and master, but it is not well to be sad. You set yourself a great task years ago, an almost superhuman task. He is ag-gomblished.”

“No, not accomplished yet, Wolff. I have only got through a part of it. I have caught my white elephant, but what am I to do with him? I know too well that my natural heir looks upon the contents of these galleries but as so many hundred thousand pounds' worth of hard cash. He is an honest man, and makes no secret of it.”

“But his son, my lord, the young Mr. Lucius?”

“Ah! he is a mystery, Wolff, that I have failed to fathom. We have known him, my friend, since he was a little child. I can't tell why, Wolff, I have never trusted him. Perhaps the aged are over-suspicious. I confess to you that if I thought he loved art for art's sake, he should have my

pictures, as he will ultimately have my title and what goes with it."

"You can tie them up, my lord."

"Yes, I know I can tie them up, but then the pictures I've loved would suffer. Who will care for them, Wolff, when you and I are gone?"

"You have sometimes talked, my lord, of giving them *en bloc* to the nation."

"Yes, Wolff, I did once think of that; but since that time I have seen that real Chamber of Horrors, the National Portrait Gallery. I should not like to send her there," he said, as he pointed to the portrait of wicked Bab Chudleigh, who simpered and smiled at him from the wall. "No, Wolff, I shouldn't like my pictures to be hawked about as loans to one East End or provincial exhibition after another, to be sneered at by crowds of unappreciating yokels. It's a very heavy responsibility, Wolff."

At this moment Reginald Haggard entered the gallery.

“I hear, my lord,” he said, as he shook hands with the old nobleman, “that you have hung the last long-sought treasure this morning. Is it really so?”

The old lord nodded.

“I suppose you will begin the weeding process now?” continued Haggard.

The old man drew himself up a little stiffly. “If you can indicate to me anything that is unworthy, you will confer an obligation; but I think you’ll find it difficult. In my opinion, Haggard,” he continued, “and in the opinion of others far better able to judge than I am, there is nothing here requiring weeding out.”

Haggard slightly flushed.

“I can only plead my ignorance,” he said; “it is what most connoisseurs do.”

“Yes, there you’re quite right; but most men begin collecting as the amusement of their old age. I began it sixty years ago,

and I'm afraid my long life's labour is over, and that, useless old man that I am, I've lived too long already."

"You look upon things in a melancholy light, my lord."

"No man is pleased when he finds his occupation gone; and perhaps it's a little sad to me to find that you care for none of these things."

"I know you wouldn't wish me to affect an interest I do not feel," said Haggard with an ingenuous smile.

"No, there you're right. For we should find him out, shouldn't we, Wolff?"

The doctor of philosophy laughed. "It is our business to detect shams," he said. "Yes, I think we should have found you out."

"Then, Dr. Wolff, you'd better try your skill on Lucius; he poses as a man of taste, I don't."

At that moment the two young men entered the gallery.

"Here he is to answer for himself," said

Haggard ; " and I'll leave him to your tender mercies. If he be a sham Priest of Art, unfrock him by all means, Dr. Wolff," said Haggard with a laugh, as he sauntered away.

The two young men greeted their aged relative with respect, and nodded familiarly to Dr. Wolff.

" I verily believe, my lord, that this younger brother of mine has no soul," said young Lucius Haggard ; " he actually tells me that the contemplation of pictures produces in him naught but headache."

" And a pain in the neck, Lucius ; don't forget the pain in the neck," said his brother.

" Yes, his pain in his neck was his other symptom. He declares he sees more beauty in a sunlit rustic hedge than in a landscape by Claude Lorraine."

" And I added to my criminality, I fear, Dr. Wolff, by declaring that I only liked a picture when it gave pleasure to my eyes,

as does the wicked wanton on the wall yonder," he added, kissing the tips of his fingers to Mistress Barbara Chudleigh.

"Ach, my young friend, do not glory in being a *Philister*," sighed Dr. Wolff.

"I fear, George, yours is but a low and sensuous ideal, if Sir Peter's commonplace masterpiece is all that rouses your enthusiasm. Why, amidst so much that is beautiful, so much that is spiritual, so much that appeals to the higher nature, you should pick out the one commonplace bit in the whole collection, I can't imagine," said Lucius with a sneer.

"You may call it commonplace if you like, Lucius. All I know is, that whatever else she may have been, if Bab Chudleigh was like that picture, she must have very closely resembled an angel."

"And have you seen them then, these angels, young sir, that you speak so confidently?" said the German doctor, as a great smile ran over his scarred face.

“Seen them? of course I have—hundreds of them. So did you, Dr. Wolff, when you were my age, and I have no doubt so did his lordship there,” said the boy with a glance at the old lord, who was peering into a picture at some distance. “I’ll be bound that Lucius here sees the angels of his dream-fancies by the dozen. He goes in for poetry, you know, and all that sort of thing, though I for my own part would rather not see his angels, for I haven’t been educated up to the pitch where one admires the beauty of decay, as Lucius has, the creatures with the pointed chins, the sandy towzled hair, the great hungry eyes, the uncomfortable poses, the deficiency of adipose tissue and the prehensile toes. I can’t say that I appreciate green shadows under the eyes, nor do I see anything poetic in a bilious air. But all these things are very dear to Lucius, at least he says so. No, give me nature and Bab Chudleigh, and I’ll make Lucius a present of art and

his bony angels, and all Mr. Swinburne's clutching horrors into the bargain."

"Thank you, George ; it's very noble and generous on your part to hand over to me what you can't appreciate."

"My dear Lucius, we all have our failings. You go in for art and the artificial, while nature is enough for me."

"When you are my age," said Lucius with the superior wisdom of an elder brother, "you will cease to judge by externals, I trust. You will have learned to peep behind the veil, and you will see the real soul seated on its throne."

"Bosh !" said George shortly.

And so the idle talk went on, and Lucius continued to pose, while the worshipper of nature took pains to fit on the Philistine's skin tighter than ever.



CHAPTER II.

AT MONTE CARLO.

MR. MAURICE CAPT, though an ambitious man and a clever one withal, had risen no higher in the world since we saw him last ; he was still Reginald Haggard's valet, but his wages were good and he had a little den of his own where his meals were served to him from the housekeeper's table in solitary state. The valet was by this time a man of property ; his wants were few and his little economies, as he called them, were large. Nobody but his banker was aware of the extent of his accumulations ; he couldn't have saved it all out of his pay, but he had managed to amass a comparatively large sum which stood to his credit in four figures. Was Mr. Capt a gambler, a backer of horses, or a dabbler in stocks and shares ? Not

a bit of it. Mr. Maurice Capt was the proprietor of a secret. For seventeen years Mr. Capt had drawn from this queer property of his a varying but comfortable income. When Lucy Warrender first came into her eight hundred a year, Mr. Capt's income had very sensibly increased. It wasn't paid quarterly or half-yearly ; the manner in which it was drawn was sufficiently original. The bills which Mr. Capt drew whenever he thought fit upon Miss Lucy Warrender were always honoured. Mr. Capt was in the habit of writing to the lady in the humble tone of a suppliant. The letters always stated with praiseworthy clearness what was the sum required, and the demand was always met with business-like promptitude. How Miss Warrender managed to satisfy this insatiable bloodsucker I cannot tell, for though she had eight hundred a year of her own, she certainly lived up to it, perhaps beyond it. But Miss Warrender gambled in many ways ; she speculated and had quite a large

account which she had opened with a very old friend of former years, Mr. Dabbler, once of the firm of Sleek and Dabbler, but now trading by himself, and though dropping his h's as freely as ever, one of the biggest brokers on the Stock Exchange and an alderman of the City of London. I suppose Alderman Dabbler must have been very much in love with Miss Warrender, though he never actually had the impertinence to propose to her. Her transactions with him were numerous, and did not pass through his books. Most of her speculations were made upon his advice, and many a handsome cheque testified either to the astuteness of Miss Lucy Warrender, or to the generosity of Mr. Alderman Dabbler. Poor Dabbler, he was but one of the many irons in Miss Warrender's fire. Miss Warrender betted; it was even said that she ran horses as "Mr. Simpson." She would stand upon the *plateau* at Monaco at the shooting matches, and in an entrancing costume and a pair of ten-

button gloves, her face carefully shaded from the blazing sun by an enormous parasol, she would watch the birds fall right and left and die in agony, or drop wounded into the sea, and still continue to back the bird or the gun, as seemed to her good, with the cosmopolitan *habitués* of the rather Bohemian but money-spending set in which she moved. It was a very miscellaneous set : peers, members of parliament, journalists, jockeys, people who lived by their wits but who somehow always managed to wear new garments of fashionable cut, actresses, singers, dancers, of European reputation, and some of them with no reputations at all, fashionables of enviable notoriety or the reverse ; all these various sorts of people were hail-fellow-well-met with Miss Warrender upon the *Plateau* at Monte Carlo, or within the walls of the great gambling house.

Lucy Warrender had kept her good looks ; I expect if she hadn't she would have gone under long before. She enjoyed herself in

a sort of feverish way ; she was a notoriously lucky woman when she gambled, and she gambled habitually and heavily. But just on the particular day we meet Miss Warrender again, Fortune had been unkind. The lady was sitting gazing out from her window on the second floor of the Hotel de Russie upon the sunlit tranquil turquoise sea. I don't think that she saw much beauty in the scene, for though she stared at the blue sea and the bluer sky, she appeared to be rapt in thought.

There are some women who are always well dressed, whose flounces and whose furbelows are ever fresh and crisp ; Lucy Warrender was one of these. It would be very easy to extract from *The Queen* a poetic description of the pretty pale blue tea-gown that Lucy Warrender wore, but I must leave it to your imagination, reader. The pale blue and the profusion of delicate filmy lace suited Lucy Warrender's dreamy blonde beauty. Seventeen years had passed lightly over her head ; perhaps the golden locks were

a trifle more golden than of old, and if their luxuriance was due a little to art, the secret was only known to Lucy and her maid. Her foot, thrust into a heel-less Tunisian slipper of blue velvet embroidered with seed pearls, beat the floor impatiently. The strong sunlight showed that there really were a few tiny wrinkles, faintest lines on the ivory forehead and at the corners of the pretty mouth, whose ruddy lips were arched like Cupid's bow. But though the lips were arched, the mouth was determined, almost cruel; but the cruelty of the mouth suddenly disappeared as the door opened, and the whole face was instantly illuminated by the smile that men termed infantine and angelic, but which rivals of her own sex styled affectedly sentimental.

It was Lucy's maid who entered the room, a big burly woman, still the fine animal of yore, Fanchette—the Fanchette who had succeeded the unhappy Hepzibah, and who had nursed the boys Lucius and George.

“ I have got them, mademoiselle,” she said in French, as she smoothed out a little heap of blue bank notes; “ seven thousand francs as usual; and a brave pair of earrings too, to produce that from the harpies of the *Mont de Piété* at Nice. The employé made me the usual compliment, mademoiselle, and as he paid me the money he declared that the pair of single stones were the most beautiful he had ever seen. The rascal took care not to say it till we had made our bargain. *Ciel*, I trust mademoiselle will be *en veine* to-night, for I shan’t feel easy till I see the stones sparkling again in mademoiselle’s ears.”

Lucy counted the notes, she dismissed the *bonne*, and then she soliloquized; not in so many words, as do heroines of melodrama, but this is what she said to herself, at all events the substance of it :

“ I am sick of life, I am sick of planning and plotting and being looked upon as an adventuress. I am sick of being bowed to

and spoken to by people who in the old time would not have presumed to beg for an introduction. I am getting *déclasseé*. Perhaps one doesn't feel it so much here, for we are pretty well all adventurers more or less, here in the gambler's paradise, though some of us have plenty of money." Miss Warrender stood before the smouldering hearth and gazed with stern scrutiny at her own features in the mirror. "Yes," she soliloquized, "Georgie, though she is two years older than I am, has certainly worn the better of the two; she is lovely Mrs. Haggard still. And what am I? A hag, a dreadful grinning hag, a woman to be flirted with, danced with and supped with, a woman who has ceased to be respected. Why, that dreadful old Baron Teufelsdroch called me his *belle petite* the other day, and I have no champion now to take the old sinner by the throat and shake the life out of him."

Lucy sank into the only comfortable chair in the room, and then she did a dreadful

thing. Dreadful to our minds, dear reader, for we are respectable and insular and we have our prejudices, our glorious insular prejudices. We can sympathize with "The Sorrows of Werther," we can even shed tears perhaps over the bread-and-butter cutting Charlotte, but were Charlotte to light a cigarette! Oh horror—fie—for shame—pschutt: the lady would at once be outside the pale of respectability, totally unworthy of our love and sympathy; worse still, to our minds she would cease to be even good-looking or to deserve the lovely and romantic name of Charlotte at all. One can't tell why it is so: the preternaturally hideous heroes of our fashionable lady novelists seek consolation in the strongest and most expensive cigars or in rough cut cavendish. Dirk Hatteraick even places a quid of pigtail in his mouth, and that bold buccaneer and the heroes of the lady novelists still remain dear delightful darlings, and bright eyes grow dim over their hairbreadth escapes, their struggles

and their woes. Spare then a little of your sympathy for poor Lucy Warrender, that bankrupt rake, as she coiled herself up in the big easy chair and took from her pocket a tiny silver case and extracted a *Laferme* cigarette. Remember, reader, that Fanchette, you, and I, are the only accomplices of her guilty weakness. She took an ember from the fire with the tongs and lighted the little cylinder, and as she did so her features once more, as of old, became lighted up with the soft placid smile of girlish enjoyment, as the angel face became surrounded by a halo of tobacco smoke. Why shouldn't poor Lucy seek consolation as did the other villains and heroes of romance? It evidently wasn't the first cigarette by many that Lucy had smoked, for she inhaled the smoke scientifically and ejected it from her nostrils like an *habituée*.

Nemesis sooner or later finds the sinner out, and when we called Lucy Warrender a bankrupt rake it was done advisedly, for

Miss Warrender had come to the end of her tether. The earrings which she had pawned—a sordid act, for they had been a love-token, the souvenir of a reckless, wicked and unhappy attachment—were literally the lady's last stake. She took the little roll of notes from her pocket and methodically counted them once more.

“So this is the end of it all,” said Lucy to herself; “a few dirty pieces of paper and that is all. And if I lose them all to-night, as something tells me is but too likely, then I must be a beggar, and must stretch out my hands for alms—or bid good-bye to all the bright sunshine and the happy, pleasant memories,” and she laughed a hard bitter little laugh. “But why should I be sorry to go? Happiness is not for such girls as I have been. My secret has been well kept, so far, but will it be a secret long? For I can't afford to pay for silence now. If I land a heavy stake, or break the bank, all will be well: if not, I must go where I

hope to find forgetfulness. But what if there should be no forgetfulness beyond the grave?" As her thoughts dwelt on the words she shuddered. "The cold, cruel, silent grave. Silent! Yes, that was something—and after—if there be an after." And then the thought of the happy girlish days at The Warren came back to her. The remembrance of the stupid faithful people she had known, and liked, and laughed at, and then the dreadful time at the Villa Lambert and what followed; and then her own triumphantly-successful trick—successful, perhaps, from the very simplicity of its audacity; and then her weary worthless after-life, with its sickening treadmill round of so-called gaiety and amusement. And then the child; why had he not died? It was for no love of her child that, by her agency, young Lucius had been foisted into the position of Haggard's heir. She had thought no further than to hide her shame, and in doing it she had unwittingly disin-

herited her own cousin's child. Why had Lucius not died?

Lucy's melancholy meditations were disturbed by the entrance of Fanchette, who handed her mistress a letter and left the room as silently as she had entered it. Lucy recognized the hand, and knew full well what the letter would certainly contain. She had guessed aright. Another demand for money from the man Capt. The words were respectful enough, there was no threat, but Lucy Warrender understood what it meant —the money or exposure.

A thousand pounds! As well might the daughters of Danaus try to fill their sieves with water, as Lucy Warrender attempt to satisfy the insatiable greed of the remorseless Capt. Miss Warrender placed the letter in the fire, and saw it consumed to ashes.

“ Unless I win heavily,” she thought, “ you will not be gratified, Maurice Capt. Then, I suppose, you will try your master, but I fancy you will have a bad quarter of an hour

with him.' The thought gave her evident pleasure ; it even made her smile.

And then she darkened the room, and flinging herself upon the sofa lay down to sleep away the hot afternoon till it should be time for dinner and the subsequent roulette.

Eight o'clock saw Miss Warrender in a charming toilette of electric blue. The little bonnet with its short curling feathers did not hide the great wavy masses of golden hair ; the little cape with its fur trimming, and the tiny muff, even the gloves and the boots, were of the same colour. As Lucy Warrender entered the Rooms she smiled, and she talked with several of her acquaintances. That hoary old sinner, General Pepper, C.B., bowed profoundly to her, and paid her his old-fashioned compliment.

“ Dayvilish pretty little woman,” he remarked to his friend Colonel Spurbox, late of the Carabineers ; “ knew her years ago in Rome. Wears well and don’t look her age.

Those little plump fair women never do. Gad, she's not got her earrings on ; sent them to her uncle's, I suppose. She'll go for the bank, Spurbox, to-night. Plucky little devil. I hope she'll win."

The eyes of the two warriors gazed after the retreating maid with sympathetic admiration

"Crisp little thing, eh ?" continued the general.

"Monstrous," echoed his comrade, with ready acquiescence. "Let's go and drink her health, and then we'll go into the thick of it and see how she gets on."

The two old bucks ambled off to drink Lucy Warrender's health ; they wished her well. Much good may it do her.

As Miss Warrender walked towards the great room where the worshippers of the Goddess Fortune most do congregate, the big *suisses*, in their handsome liveries and chains of office, bowed obsequiously ; they all knew her as an *habituée* and a constant

customer of the tables. When she reached the roulette table itself, that veteran diplomatist, one of the oldest and most faithful of her admirers, the Duc de la Houspignolle, offered to vacate his chair, with many a protestation and a succession of courteous bows.

“I have been unlucky, dear Mademoiselle Warrender; Fortune has frowned on me, but now I am far happier, for I exchange her frowns for the smiles of Venus.”

“I won’t take your chair, duke,” said Lucy. “I may lean upon it, and try to be your Mascotte and to bring you luck.”

But somehow or other, whether the pretty Englishwoman’s presence upset the old gambler’s calculations or not I cannot tell, but he lost, and in a quarter of an hour rose from his seat.

“Revenge me on the Philistine, dear lady, if you can,” said the old man, “for I am *décaré*—but don’t take my unlucky chair, I pray you. You will?” he con-

tinued in astonishment. "Well, if you will you must; at all events take my card, it may help you," and he handed her the little card with the big black-headed pin, by means of which the experienced players mark and register the exact result of each successive *coup*.

Lucy Warrender took the chair with a smile, and laughed gaily, as with the card she received a little tender squeeze from the wicked old hand, and then she sat down with a full determination, as the Americans put it, "to plank down her bottom dollar." Lucy Warrender was sitting next to the croupier. She handed him one of her thousand-franc notes and he gave her in exchange a little *rouleau*, neatly sealed at both ends, containing the equivalent in gold. For nearly three-quarters of an hour Miss Warrender confined herself to stakes of one or two Napoleons at a time, which she pushed out before the little glittering pile in front of her, and

which were placed upon the desired square with wonderful rapidity by the obsequious croupier. It is a curious fact that your croupier, that well-paid but honest official, for some mysterious reason or other always mentally identifies himself with the bank ; it gives him absolute pleasure to rake in the winnings, and he feels some strange vicarious twinge of agony when he commences the process of paying out. But whenever Miss Warrender won, this particular croupier pushed her gains towards her with a little smile, and strange to say didn't seem to feel it in the least. And now Lucy looked at her card. For twenty-seven *coups* she had placed a single Napoleon upon the number twenty-seven. Of course, at roulette, some number or zero itself is bound to come up every time, but number twenty-seven was invariably unlucky. Lucy Warrender's left hand was thrust into the pocket of her dress ; it clutched, as an Ashantee warrior

clutches his fetish, the key of her room at the Hotel de Russie, and from the key hung its little brass label—it was number twenty-seven. For three-quarters of an hour then, and for twenty-seven *coups*, Miss Warrender had pursued her Will-o'-the-Wisp ; the one or two Napoleons that she staked each time was mere child's play to her, for as we know she was in the habit of gambling heavily. At the twenty-eighth *coup* Miss Warrender changed the amount of her stake upon the unfortunate number ; for the twenty-franc piece she substituted a hundred-franc note and handed it to the croupier ; he thrust it into the great glass and metal cash-box at his side and pushed five Napoleons on to the square marked twenty-seven. “*Messieurs, le jeu est fait. Rien ne va plus,*” said the bald-headed high priest of the table, who sat exactly opposite the gentleman with the rake, who had so deftly carried out Miss Warrender's directions. He seized the big plated handle, gave

it the necessary twirl as he said the words, and tossed the little ball of fate, with the usual professional spin, upon the rapidly-revolving disc. Round flew the wheel of fortune, and round flew the ball, making little irregular jumps. As the whirling disc revolves less rapidly, every eye is fixed upon the ball. The wheel is about to stop. The ball jumps into 15, thence into 17. The wheel has almost stopped; the ball will surely rest in No. 23. No, it has not quite stopped, it goes a little further yet. Heads are craned forward. Lucy Warrender clutches the key of her bedroom tighter than ever. And then the bald-headed high priest of Baal calls out in the regulation monotone, “*Vingt-sept. Rouge Impair et Passe!*” Rhadamanthus, Minos and Æacus stretch out their rakes, and gold, notes, and fat five-franc pieces, which have been staked by the unhappy backers of black, even, the zero and the various numbers (all but twenty-seven, lucky twenty-seven) are

swept away in an instant. Then the croupiers cover the stakes of the lucky backers of odd and red with their equivalents ; nothing remains on the table now but fortunate Lucy's five Napoleons. The croupier at her side gives it the little professional knock with his rake, sweeps the five Napoleons back towards Miss Warrender, and counts out to her from his cash-box, with unerring rapidity, the sum of three thousand five hundred francs in notes. There is a little hum of applause. "*Faites vos jeux, messieurs.*" Down rained the notes, the Napoleons, the British sovereigns and the five-franc pieces, and the game continues with monotonous regularity.

For three mortal hours Lucy Warrender clutched her hotel key, and played with varying success. At one time there was quite a little heap of notes and gold in front of her, upon which she discreetly laid her fan. She had steadily backed the number twenty-seven for varying but ever

increasing amounts. The number twenty-seven had come up no less than eight times and had been the cause of Miss Warrender's winning heavily. The keenest eye at that time could have detected no wrinkle on Lucy's lovely girlish face. But fortune after a while ceased to favour her; the crowd of admiring onlookers, "the gallery," that had stood behind her chair attracted by her successes gradually dwindled, and the heap of gold and notes in front of her slowly but surely took unto themselves wings and flew away. But the gouty old Frenchman, the *Duc de la Houspignolle*, faithful knight that he was, still stood behind her chair. Old Pepper and the veteran Colonel Spurbox, of the Carabineers, still leered at her, in mingled pity and admiration, from the other side of the great roulette table. Lucy Warrender still clutched her key, and still backed fatal number twenty-seven; her mouth was dry and parched as she took out her last thousand-

franc note, and, it not being permitted to stake that sum at roulette, she took it to the *Trente et Quarante* table, and lost it at a single *coup*.

The lady had played her last stake and lost it. She rose to leave.

“Let me be your banker, dear Miss Warrender,” whispered the aged Mephistopheles who stood behind her chair.

“No, duke, not that. I haven’t quite sunk to that yet, you know.”

“Always *farouche*, dear Miss Warrender, but I apologize,” he continued as he gave her his arm.

Perhaps the little hand that rested on it trembled slightly, but Lucy was a Warrender, and plucky; she nodded and bowed in every direction; she smiled and simpered as sweetly as of yore; she sat in the great restaurant at one of the little marble tables and sucked an *orangeade glacée* through two straws, and then the Duc de la Houspignolle escorted her back to the Hotel de Russie

with all respect, where Fanchette anxiously awaited her arrival.

Fanchette didn't ask her mistress how she had prospered, for her gesture as she flaccidly dropped into her lounge-chair told the woman all she wished to know.

"You can go, Fanchette," said Lucy ; "if I want anything I'll touch the hand-bell."

The woman yawned, courtesied and departed.

Lucy Warrender opened her writing-case and commenced an affectionate letter to her uncle. In it she said incidentally :

"There are quite a number of people here that we know. The old *Duc de la Houspignolle*, still quite the old beau ; and that dreadful old *General Pepper*, the man we met at Rome, and who was mixed up in *Reginald's* affair with poor *Barbiche*, and *Colonel Spurbox*. They talk of making up a party to run across to *Nice*. I think of joining them. If we go we shall leave

the day after to-morrow; everything of course depends upon the weather. I——”

Here Lucy Warrender deliberately let her pen fall upon the paper. Then she got up, looked at herself in the glass and frowned; and then she did a thing she hadn't done for years. She knelt down at her bed-side and said her prayer to heaven, the very prayer she had been accustomed to say as a little child upon her nurse's lap. Then she took a printed receipt of the *Mont de Piété* for a pair of brilliant solitaire earrings, and burnt it in the flame of the candle.

“No one will miss me,” she muttered to herself, “no one, save Maurice Capt, for I have been an income to him, and Georgie, perhaps. Poor Georgie!” she added with a sigh. She never even thought of Lucius; she knew full well that even had the youth known she was his mother, *he* would assuredly not have missed her.

“I wonder whether the old duke will

be there," she continued to herself; "all the English are sure to come. We never miss a funeral; it's one of our sad pleasures," she added with a hollow laugh. Then she took from her dressing-case a dark blue fluted medicine bottle; it was labelled, "The sedative mixture, a teaspoonful for a dose at bedtime. POISON." The last word had a little special red label all to itself. The bottle was nearly full. Miss Warrender deliberately poured out seven-eighths of its contents into a tumbler, then she recorked the bottle, replaced it in her dressing-case and swallowed the contents of the tumbler at a draught, and then carefully and deliberately washed the glass and dried it with the towel. Then she sat herself down in the lounge-chair. In ten minutes she dozed; she soon slept peacefully and calmly. In half-an-hour she had ceased to exist.

"On the 23rd inst., at the Hotel de Russie, Monte Carlo, Lucy, the only

daughter of the late Colonel George Warrender, of the H. E. I. C. Service, aged 35, suddenly of heart-disease."

This was the first intimation to Lucy Warrender's friends in London of her sudden death.

"Poor thing!" said Mrs. Charmington, now quite the old woman, "I wonder how she managed that lovely-coloured hair."



CHAPTER III.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

MRS. HAGGARD and her husband, both in deep mourning, sat in the special boudoir at Walls End Castle which had been furnished and set apart for his grand-nephew's wife on her first arrival years ago by old Lord Pit Town. Haggard looked pale and weary, and well he might, for he had gone straight to Monte Carlo and had come straight back, stopping only forty-eight hours there, just time enough to lay Lucy Warrender in her grave. He had not gone alone; at his wife's insistence he had taken the young Lucius with him. He had been astonished at the determined manner in which Georgie pressed this arrangement upon him; he yielded, though with a bad grace. When he reached the Hotel de

Russie, both he and Lucius had declined to look on the face of the dead woman. Haggard had a long interview with Fanchette, and then he called upon the Commissary of Police. The night before his mother was laid in her grave, Lucius Haggard, unknown to his companion, who was shut up in his room writing, visited the Rooms, won a couple of thousand francs, and thoroughly enjoyed himself.

The next day the two men stood by the side of the shallow grave; graves are shallow in Monaco, for the ground is very rocky. A wandering English clergyman, of more than doubtful reputation, gabbled through the service for the burial of the dead. The stones and bits of rock rattled upon the coffin with a hollow sound, for the grave-digger didn't trouble himself much about the feelings of the relatives of the foreign heretic.

“I think my aunt Lucy went off tremendously in the last year,” said young

Lucius to his companion as they left the cemetery.

“Let her rest, boy, let her rest,” was all the answer he got.

There was a sort of grey look of horror about Haggard’s face, that the boy put down to grief for the departed. He was a hard-hearted youth, and was frankly surprised that Haggard showed any feeling at all.

The husband and wife, as we have said, sat in Georgie’s boudoir. This was what passed between them.

“Your cousin seems to have made a nice mess of it,” said Haggard. “Why she was penniless.”

“Well, that wouldn’t much matter, Reginald; she could have written to Coutts’ for more.”

“Gad, they write me that she drew out the last farthing she had in the world two months ago. And that woman Fanchette, who is a very bad lot indeed, or I’m very

much mistaken, told me she pawned her earrings the day before she—died."

Georgie nodded. "I remember them, a pair of large single-stone earrings. I fancy she must have bought them when she first came into her property. I saw them quite by chance last summer, for the first time; and when I admired them, she said that she had had them for years, that they had been her first folly and had cost her dear."

"Well, here they are at any rate," said Haggard; "she pawned them for seven thousand francs, and I redeemed them after a lot of bother. And that's all that remains. She had spent or gambled away every farthing of the rest. I don't know whether I ought to tell you, Georgie," he continued in a softer tone.

"Tell me, Reginald, tell me what? Did you know?" and the light of love came back into Georgie Haggard's eyes, as she thought that perhaps her careless heartless husband had, from a wish to shield her cousin's

honour, silently and deliberately allowed poor Lucy's bastard child to be fathered upon him. But the light quickly faded, and the eyes were suffused with tears, as her husband answered coarsely :

“Did I know what? I know this—she poisoned herself, there's not a doubt of that.”

And then, without the slightest attempt to soften the ghastly details, he brutally told his wife the particulars of her cousin's end.

“They manage these things much better there than here,” he said. “Twelve Tom Fools are not called upon to sit in one's dining room and give their opinion. The Commissary of Police had the whole matter cut and dried. I saw the official doctor too—a hungry fellow that. Of course I had to bribe the pair of them. Lucy Warrender poisoned herself, Georgie. She did it artfully enough, with chloral. Why, they showed me the bottle; she had swal-

lowed enough to kill half-a-dozen women. What a fool she was, when one comes to think of it! Why, she could have married well any number of times, if she'd liked; she could have had Spunyarn years and years ago, if she had chosen to lift her finger. What a fool she was!"

Yes, that was her epitaph: "What a fool she was!" You couldn't have put it more tersely and more truly, Reginald Haggard. What a thoughtless wicked fool she had been; she had wrecked her own life and her cousin's by her wicked folly. "What a fool she was!"

I verily believe that if Haggard had shown one spark of feeling in the matter of poor Lucy's death, his wife would have spoken, after a silence of twenty years; but his last words had checked the impulse, and Georgie merely nodded, while the tears rolled down her cheeks, as she silently accepted the justice of her husband's verdict.

As she sat and pondered over her cousin's

sorry ending, she felt that the least she could do for the dead girl was still to jealously guard her miserable secret.

While the elders were talking, the two young men were walking in the great avenue that for nearly half a mile runs from the principal entrance of the park to the big hall door of Walls End Castle. Lucius had much to tell; he was full of the journey, and he went over all the details of the funeral to the younger man.

“Rattling good place, that Hotel de Russie; they gave us an uncommonly good dinner, and ortolans. I didn’t think much of them, but the governor was very enthusiastic, and ordered them again for breakfast. By Jove! George,” continued the young fellow, “he’s so fond of them that I believe if mother, or even I, were to die to-morrow, the governor would order ortolans for breakfast if he could get them. I say, George,” he added, “I’m in funds, and I don’t mind doing the generous thing, if you like. I

know you're hard up—beastly hard up—you always are. I'll make you a present of a pony, George ”

Young George Haggard smiled, and took the five-and-twenty pounds, in crisp bank notes, which his father's heir produced from his waistcoat pocket. “ I'll take it as a loan, Lucius,” he said with a little laugh, “ to be repaid when I become Lord Chancellor.”

“ All right, my boy,” said the other. “ Now if you can keep a secret, I'll tell you how I got it.” And then he went off into a long description of the great Temple of Fortune on the shores of the Mediterranean. How he had retired early, on the plea of fatigue; how he had escaped undiscovered to the Rooms; how he had backed his luck and won his money. “ Eighty pounds wasn't bad for a first attempt, you know,” he said. “ I saw old Pepper,” he continued, “ in the thick of it; but I had to keep dark, you know, for I

shouldn't have cared for the old boy to see me there."

George still held his brother's welcome present in his hand, and the boy twisted the notes nervously in his fingers. He hesitated, but not for long.

"Don't be offended, Lucius," he said; "I think I'd rather not take it, if you don't mind."

"As you please, my boy," said the other, holding out his hand willingly enough. "As they say in the schools, *Non olet*."

"It does to me, Lucius—it does to me."

The young men continued their walk up and down the great aisle of old beech trees, and Lucius returned to his ecstatic description of the scene in the Halls of Dazzling Delight; but I don't think the other young fellow heard him, for he was thinking of the dead woman who was sleeping in her lonely grave.

Lucky Lucy! dead a week, and you have two human beings who still mourn your loss.

“I always thought you were a fool, George ; but you really are a bigger fool than even I ever took you to be. I actually hand you five-and-twenty pounds, which you decline with thanks. I don’t understand you, George. You neglect your opportunities. Why don’t you make up to the old man, or cultivate a taste for art, as I do ; I mean to make art pay, my boy.”

“Well, you see, Lucius, it might be awkward if his lordship found me out. I’m afraid I find more pleasure in walking up and down this big avenue and staring up at the rooks, than in spending my time in the Pit Town galleries.”

“Oh ! I see ; Child of Nature, and all that sort of thing. Why don’t you go in for being a poet, George ? It’s the only real business that I know of suited for a thorough-paced fool, though as a rule it don’t pay.”

“Simply because I’m not a humbug, my boy.”

“You might do a good deal with a rhyming dictionary, you know ; particularly if you let your hair grow.”

“I don’t think there’s much poetry about me, Lucius. I like the air, and the light, and the green leaves, and those black chaps who hop about from branch to branch, and who look like a lot of disreputable parsons, all preaching at once about nothing at all.”

“Oh, I see, you admire the beauties of nature. Now I look upon this old avenue from quite another standpoint. Sooner or later it’ll be mine, and all the rest of the pomps and vanities too, I suppose—the plate and the pictures, and the title, George. Yes, there’s something in a title. But they’re a precious long while coming.”

“Don’t be a brute, Lucius,” was all his brother replied.

While the two young fellows carelessly talked and smoked in the great avenue, old Lord Pit Town sat in his study and

held a momentous conversation with Georgie's husband. Reginald Haggard stood before the fire looking exceedingly uncomfortable.

"I wish you'd be candid with me, Haggard. Was there any informality about your marriage with Georgina?"

"Good gracious, no. What makes your lordship hint at such a thing?"

"That I will explain to you directly. In the meantime answer me honestly; don't forget that as the head of the family I stand in the position of a father to you. Anything you may say to me will of course be between ourselves. Can you assure me, as between gentlemen, that you made no previous marriage? Was there any such entanglement in America?"

"It seems to me that your lordship is asking me to say that I am an unmitigated villain. Still, to satisfy you as the head of the family, I give you my word that nothing of the sort ever occurred. Of course like

most young fellows I have made a fool of myself with dozens of women, or rather perhaps they made a fool of me. I sighed and dangled, perhaps I even hinted at marriage. Doubtless I was a young idiot, like most young fellows of my age, but my peculiar form of idiotcy never developed itself in a matrimonial direction."

"I'm uncommonly glad to hear it, Reginald, for I have been uncomfortable for a day or two, and now that my mind is at rest, you shall see what caused my apparently indiscreet questions."

The old lord opened a despatch-box which lay upon his writing-table, and taking from it a letter, handed the document to his heir. Haggard seated himself, opened the letter, and read it carefully through. It was a strangely written manuscript on ordinary thick note-paper. If the writer had intended to prevent any attempt at identification, he had thoroughly succeeded. The precaution he had taken was simple,

but sufficiently ingenious. Your ordinary anonymous letter writer is content to slope his writing the wrong way, or if very acute he uses his left hand; but the expert, if placed upon his trail, generally succeeds in detecting some peculiarity sufficient to identify him. The writer of the letter which Lord Pit Town handed to Haggard was evidently a man of originality, for the letter and its address were not written in a running hand, but in carelessly printed Roman capitals.

As Haggard perused the letter his brow grew black as night, but when he had ended it, he tossed it with a contemptuous laugh upon the table.

Here is the letter *verbatim*:

“ MY LORD,

“ I ADDRESS YOU TO LET YOU KNOW THAT I AM POSSESSED OF INFORMATION WHICH WILL ENABLE ME, SHOULD I FEEL SO DISPOSED, TO ENTIRELY ALTER THE SUCCESSION TO YOUR TITLE AND TO UPSET ANY DISTRIBUTION OF YOUR PROPERTY THAT YOU MAY MAKE. I AM PREPARED TO SELL TO YOU THE INFORMATION FOR THE SUM OF £5000. I MAKE YOUR LORDSHIP

THE FIRST OFFER, SIMPLY BECAUSE I THINK THAT YOU WILL AT ONCE SEE THE WISDOM OF ACCEPTING IT. SHOULD YOU DECIDE NOT TO DO SO, I SHALL STILL GET MY PRICE, THOUGH I MAY HAVE TO WAIT TILL YOUR LORDSHIP'S DEATH. LITIGATION WILL, OF COURSE, ENSUE, AND A DISGRACEFUL SCANDAL WILL BECOME COMMON PROPERTY. SHOULD YOUR LORDSHIP FEEL DISPOSED TO LISTEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO TELL, A LINE ADDRESSED TO 193B, BROWN'S NEWS ROOMS, CHEAPSIDE, WILL BE SUFFICIENT. THE FACT OF MY NOT ASKING FOR PAYMENT FOR MY INFORMATION UNTIL I HAVE GIVEN IT SHOULD BE TO YOUR LORDSHIP A SUFFICIENT GUARANTEE OF ITS GENUINENESS."

"What can the fellow mean?" said the old lord. "Can Hetton have contracted a secret marriage?"

Haggard shook his head. "It's probably a mere vulgar trick to obtain money," said he. "Shall you see the fellow?"

"It would, perhaps, be better that you saw him, Reginald; you are as much concerned as I am, nay more so. Make an appointment to see the man in town. I will write to him, and if the secret he alludes to be genuine it is cheap at the money, if it were only to prevent expensive litigation and the worse horror

that he hints at—the dragging of our name through the mire."

So it was arranged. A letter was dispatched to 193 B, making an appointment for the astute writer of the letter to see Mr. Reginald Haggard upon a certain day at the old lord's house in Grosvenor Square. Reginald Haggard sat for a whole hour waiting in vain. Nobody came to him with a mysterious communication, and at the end of a week both he and the old lord had dismissed the matter from their minds as an impudent and stupid hoax.

To the mind of the shrewd reader the name of the writer of the anonymous letter is no mystery. Mr. Maurice Capt had been seriously disappointed when, for the first time in his life, one of his applications to Lucy Warrender had been unsuccessful. But Lucy Warrender was now beyond his reach. Capt felt aggrieved; he considered that his demands upon Miss Warrender had been excessively moderate, and he felt a sort of pride in

the fact that he had kept her secret so long and so cheaply. But now Lucy Warrender was dead, and the contract between Capt and the lady at an end. Mr. Capt, when he wrote his rather ambiguous anonymous communication to the old lord, had thought the matter well out; he had made up his mind not to reveal the nature of what he had to tell until he had the old lord's promise to let him have the sum he demanded. For Mr. Capt well knew that it is possible to provide even against extraordinary contingencies; he knew that there were such things as family treaties, and he knew that his threat, if he could only get Lord Pit Town to believe in its genuineness, would be only terrible to the old man by its rendering him practically incapable of disposing of his property, and leaving the very succession to his title in doubt. Mr. Capt was sharp enough to know that if once he had the old lord's promise, the five thousand pounds was as good as paid. But Mr. Capt had a holy horror of two things. The

one, which he dreaded with a natural terror of the unknown, was the criminal law of England ; the other was a desperate fear of the wrath of big Reginald Haggard. For once his master had lost his temper with the valet. It was nearly twenty years ago now since Reginald Haggard, in a moment of indignation, had literally thrashed Mr. Capt within an inch of his life, and though it was twenty years ago Mr. Capt's bones still ached with the remembrance of that tremendous beating. So that the suggested interview with Haggard entirely upset all the valet's well-arranged plans. Could he but have had a private conversation with the old lord, and the required promise, he felt that he would have proved his case up to the hilt, and thus have obtained what he looked upon as the honest reward of his long silence. But though a clever man, Mr. Capt was a coward, and he feared to face the fury of Lord Pit Town's heir.

The valet repeatedly turned the matter

over in his mind, and found it a very complicated question. Of course, the one person in the world to whom the secret was most valuable was young George Haggard. The facts had but to be published to the world and George would jump at once from the precarious position of a younger son into that of the direct heir to an earldom and the property of a man of enormous wealth, while as for Lucius, he would become but the nameless byblow of old Warrender's niece. But there were several disturbing influences to Mr. Capt's calculations. To neither of the young men could he sell his secret for money down. This was a very serious consideration indeed. As for George, he might decline to do business at all, from loyalty to his mother; while as for Lucius, Mr. Capt well knew that it was impossible to trust him. The valet at length determined that he would sound young George Haggard upon the matter, and having made up his mind, proceeded to do so at the first opportunity.

Mr. Capt had not long to wait, for he encountered the young fellow in one of his solitary rambles in the park, and seeing that they were secure from interruption, plunged at once *in medias res*.

Young George Haggard was seated upon a stile meditatively gazing upon the landscape, when he was roused by a slight cough behind him, which proceeded from his father's discreet body servant.

“ Halloa ! Capt,” said the youth good-naturedly ; “ enjoying the beauties of nature ? ”

“ Yes, Mr. George ; one can’t well help it in such a lovely place as this.”

“ I suppose ordinary people like you and I, Capt, don’t appreciate it as we ought. That, as my brother tells me, requires culture. He would doubtless see more in it than we do, being a man of culture, as he is, you know.”

“ Perhaps the old place, sir, may look all the pleasanter to him, for in the ordinary course of things, you see, sir, he must come into it some day or other. That must be a

very pleasant thought, sir," added the valet after a pause.

"Well, I'm not so sure about that, you know ; there are lots of responsibilities, you see," and the young man proceeded to fill his pipe philosophically.

"You may come into it yourself, sir, one of these days, who knows?" said the valet in a carneying tone.

Young George Haggard started, and stared at Mr. Capt, who seemed to him to have slightly forgotten himself.

"Stranger things than that have happened, sir," continued the Swiss.

"Well, you see, my man, as my father and Mr. Lucius—to say nothing of his lordship—would both have to go to the wall first, it doesn't seem a likely contingency. And do you know I don't think it's quite the thing to talk about, Capt."

But the valet was not to be put down.

"Anyhow, it's a great position for so young a gentleman as Mr. Lucius," insisted

the man. "Many a man has sold his soul for less than that," he continued, as he gazed admiringly at the Castle, which occupied the centre of the peacefully romantic landscape.

Young George Haggard stared at the valet in undisguised astonishment. "Fellow's been drinking," he thought; "he seems strangely impertinent, that accounts for it."

"Ah, they manage things differently, sir, in my country. It's share and share alike there. My father, sir, had seven sons, and we each of us took an equal share of his little bit of land as a matter of right."

"Well, perhaps, Capt, that's what they'll do here when England becomes a republic. But I don't think that it'll happen in my time, and I don't think I could persuade Lucius to go halves with me."

Seeing that the young man was disinclined to continue the conversation, the valet touched his hat respectfully and took himself off.

It is a highly respectable thing to be a landowner; the freeholder has many advantages, but getting rid of the property, particularly in the present day, is as a rule both difficult and expensive. Mr. Capt was like the proprietor of an Irish estate; far from being able to dispose of it at a reasonable figure, he was unable to obtain even an offer for his secret, and it was a valuable secret; but then, though a white elephant is a valuable animal, it is not an investment that most people would care to hold, and Mr. Capt's property now seemed indeed but a white elephant. Had it not been for his holy fear of his master he might have attempted to make terms with Mrs. Haggard, but his terror of Lord Pit Town's heir was extreme and had become a second nature to him.

The love of home is specially developed among the honest and economical inhabitants of Switzerland; like the Scotchmen they quit their dear native land young, in the hope

of making their fortunes ; but unlike the Scots they inevitably return to the Fatherland with the results of a life of industry, and this was the dream of Mr. Capt's life. Like a wise man, finding he could not get a cash purchaser, he determined, though very much against his own inclination, to make a bargain with young Lucius Haggard at the earliest opportunity ; but he knew that if he trusted to the honour of Lucy Warrender's son he would be leaning upon a broken reed, and he walked back to the discharge of his duties at the Castle in a state of considerable depression.



CHAPTER IV.

PALLIDA MORS.

IT was the second of September. Reginald Haggard's usual invitations had been accepted by a select party of his intimates. They had had a great slaughter in the well-stocked Walls End preserves on the day before. General Pepper, Lord Spunyarn, Colonel Spurbox, the host and the two young men sat down to breakfast, and Georgie Haggard presided at the meal, looking to Spunyarn's mind handsomer than ever in the deep mourning which she still wore for her cousin Lucy. But Mrs. Haggard was not the only lady who graced the breakfast-table at the Castle, for Mrs. Dodd had arrived to pay a long-promised visit the day before, of course accompanied by her husband. As some men never travel without a hat box, so Mrs. Dodd

never left King's Warren without the Rev. John.

“I am so glad to have met you once more, Lord Spunyarn,” said the vicar’s wife ; “isolated as I am at King’s Warren, it is so seldom my privilege to meet any man having a purpose in life, and the men with a purpose, you know, are after all the only men worth knowing.” Here she gave a benignant and comprehensive glance round the table, and every one felt that he at least was not worth Mrs. Dodd’s notice, which was exactly the sensation the vicar’s wife intended to produce.

“Awfully good of you, dear Mrs. Dodd, I’m sure, but I’m afraid I can hardly claim the credit of being a man with a purpose. I went to the East End first, you know, merely from curiosity and because the people were excessively amusing, but nowadays ‘slumming’ is the fashion and a great many smart people I know do as I do, merely for a new sensation.”

“ Ah, you do good by stealth and blush to find it fame,” said the lady.

“ I don’t know if you can call it doing good. I give very little of my money away, though I certainly do spend a good deal of my time among the abjectly poor. I became a sort of confidential adviser to a good many of them, a kind of honorary amateur solicitor. I drifted into it somehow or other. I acted as a sort of buffer between the East End Lazarus and his landlord I was instrumental in obtaining for Lazarus certain rights which had been long in abeyance in the East End ; either my client didn’t know his rights, or he found them difficult to enforce ; the landlords would screw the uttermost farthing out of the poor wretches in the shape of rent, and if they didn’t pay they were sold up. The *quid pro quo* they got for their rent was simply a place to rot and die in—no water, no drains, no ventilation, no anything. Then there was the sweating system ; women working fifteen or sixteen hours a day for

a pittance of ninepence: women doing men's work and getting next to nothing for it; and the attempted redress of a thousand and one nameless grievances and horrors."

"Oh, Lord Spunyarn," cried Mrs. Dodd, "would that I could walk hand in hand with you through those dreadful places, sharing in such work."

"I have no doubt Dodd could exchange and become one of the wise men of the East, if he tried," said Haggard maliciously.

"Ah, dear Mr. Haggard, my husband was never formed for missionary work. Ever since my girlhood I have tried to rouse his enthusiasm, but in vain. I don't believe he has any enthusiasm," and here the voice of the Reverend John Dodd was heard in an unctuous whisper addressing Colonel Spurbox in commendation of the dish in front of him, to which he helped himself copiously for the second time.

"I'm quite certain, my dear sir, that there is no more successful way of accommodating

the freshly-killed partridge than in a *salmi*. I say this advisedly, and after many years' experience. I speak feelingly, colonel. Till the fourth you can't do better than stick to *salmi*; I always do."

"There's no want of enthusiasm in that, anyhow, Dodd," said Spunyarn with a smile, while the two young men laughed aloud.

"Ah," sighed the vicaress in a stage whisper, "forgive his little weakness; he *will* hanker after the flesh-pots—the flesh-pots of Egypt."

"Be exact, my dear, be exact," cried the vicar; "it was quail, probably roast quail, though that is a succulent dish, that is referred to; certainly not *salmi* of partridges."

"Don't trifle, John," cried Mrs. Dodd.

"I don't, my dear; I assure you that I am seriously, profitably and pleasantly employed. Good gracious me, is there anything one need be ashamed of in the admiration

of art? And what art can be higher than the culinary art, which must have been necessarily one of the earliest, if not the very earliest of all? Some people are born without an ear for music; I am one of those unfortunates myself, but to make up for it I have been blessed by heaven with an appreciative palate. Would you have me neglect my advantage, would you wish me to bury my one talent in a napkin? Certainly not, Mrs. Dodd. Art I appreciate, especially high art, and I'll trouble you for a little more of the *salmi*, Dr. Wolff."

"And how are things going on in the parish, Mr. Dodd?" said Georgie. "Are the Dissenters as active as ever?"

"No, my dear madam; just now the Church is far more popular."

"Thanks to organization, thanks to organization," burst in the vicar's wife impetuously. "Our curates' wives are admirable organizers. You remember the Misses Sleek, Mr. Haggard?"

“That I do ; uncommonly good-looking girls they were too.”

“Well, Mr. Haggard, it was the last thing that I should have expected, but they both went into the Church.”

“You mean that they married my curates, my dear,” interrupted the vicar.

“No, Mr. Dodd, I said it advisedly, they went into the Church. I suppose that in the old days when high-born ladies became nuns that they went into the Church, and in doing so vowed themselves to a life of self-denial. And in this present time any lady who marries a clergyman, Mr. Dodd, vows herself to a life of self-denial and penance, and certainly enters the Church. I did,” she added with a sigh, “and I glory in it. The humble curate may rise to rank and title, but in the highly unlikely event of your becoming a bishop, John, I should remain plain Mrs. Dodd still.”

“Not plain, my dear—not plain.”

But Mrs. Dodd did not condescend to

reprove him ; she forgave the flippancy of the remark for the sake of the compliment.

“The fact is,” said the vicar, “that since that fellow Smiter left King’s Warren a great many of the better-disposed of his people have come over to us. The services are more ornate than they were, and consequently more attractive. So are the sermons, I suppose. At all events, they are shorter. Then we’ve got a Sisterhood and a Young Men’s Christian Association, who play cricket in summer and football in winter. Then again we use collecting bags, while at Gilgal they still stick to the plates. Of course the collections have dropped off to a mere nothing, but the congregations have increased wonderfully. Certainly the plates produced a healthy rivalry, but the bags, I take it, are less of a tax, and the congregation assuredly prefers them. It’s a mystery to me where they get all the threepenny-pieces, and I am sorry to say that farthings, and even

buttons, are not uncommon. Still, your father and Justice Sleek—everybody calls him Justice Sleek now—let us have all we want in the shape of money, so I suppose there's nothing to complain of."

"Whatever my husband may say, dear Mrs. Haggard, there has been a great awakening, and though he may not see it, for none are so proverbially blind as those who won't see, I look upon it as principally due, at all events in my own parish, to the exertions of my own sex. My curates are both highly popular."

"My dear, curates always are highly popular when they are married to wealthy good-looking young women, and their pockets consequently bursting, literally bursting, with half-crowns; I may add that, in my experience, these are the only circumstances under which married curates *are* popular."

"You have much to be grateful for, John."

"I know it, my dear—I know it," said

the vicar as he finished his coffee. And then the party broke up to commence the real business of the day.

No one would have recognized in the well-appointed and terribly respectable head keeper who touched his hat to the party of gentlemen as they emerged upon the lawn, the former village reprobate—Blogg, the whilom King's Warren poacher. But so it was. By some strange fatality or other your poacher either becomes a confirmed reprobate or blossoms into the very best kind of gamekeeper. Perhaps it's on the principle of set a thief to catch a thief that those estates are best preserved where the head keeper has been poacher in his youth. Just as the man who has risen from the ranks makes the sternest martinet and the strictest disciplinarian, so the reformed poacher is invariably the prince of gamekeepers, when honest.

The vicar of King's Warren was a High Churchman. I believe he would have ridden

to hounds with pleasure but for the fact that he found it impossible to find anything up to his weight. But he sternly drew the line at carrying a gun. Though the vicar denied himself this pleasure, he joined the shooting party, for his intense appreciation of the culinary art made violent exercise a necessity of his existence.

As Mrs. Haggard and the vicar's wife sat and chatted over the little details of life at the village of King's Warren, the happy home of the former's girlhood, Mrs. Haggard remarked to her companion that it was strange that they had not heard a shot for at least half an hour. As she uttered the words Lord Spunyarn entered the room, pale and out of breath, and evidently hardly able to control his emotion.

“What! back so soon, Lord Spunyarn? Is anything the matter?” said Mrs. Dodd.

“Something dreadful has happened.”

“Has there been an accident? Has anything happened to George?” cried the

mother, and the colour left her lips as she rose excitedly.

At that moment the old lord entered the room.

“George is safe, dear madam,” said her husband’s old friend, “but I have hurried here as the bearer of bad news, and I must bid you prepare for the worst.”

“Gad, sir, don’t keep us in suspense,” cried old Lord Pit Town, with the irritability of age. “Is Lucius the victim?”

“No, the boys are safe, dear Mrs. Haggard,” he continued. “My old friend is badly hurt. In passing through a hedge

—”

But Mrs. Haggard had fainted in the arms of the vicar’s wife.

And then Lord Spunyarn told his tale to the old man, while Mrs. Dodd and the women-servants who, unsummoned, had appeared upon the scene, busied themselves around the fainting woman.

It appeared that in getting through a

hedge to pick up a bird that, wounded, had managed to struggle through it, Reginald Haggard's gun had suddenly exploded and lodged a charge of shot in his chest. It was not from carelessness; but Haggard's foot had caught in a rabbit burrow, and as he fell the accident happened. Before their eyes the thing had taken place. There was nothing mysterious about it. It was terribly sudden, that was all.

Hardly had Spunyarn told his tale when Mrs. Haggard came to herself. Tearless and wan she rose to her feet, and taking the old earl's arm, she said simply but in a broken voice, "Let us go to him—let us go to him at once, Lord Pit Town; there may be hope—there may be hope yet."

The old man looked towards Spunyarn interrogatively, but a shake of the head was the only response.

Mrs. Haggard hadn't to go far to meet her wounded husband, for as they passed into the great entrance hall of the Castle a melan-

choly little procession came in by the main doorway. Four keepers bore a hurdle, upon which lay Lord Pit Town's wounded heir. His face was pale, the lips bloodless, while cold drops stood upon his brow. The four men halted, uncertain where to deposit their burden. Georgie Haggard, quitting the old lord's arm, sprang at once to her husband's side, seized his hand, and attempted to wipe the death drops from his brow.

“Don't touch me, Georgie,” he muttered, and the voice sounded unequal and cavernous. “I've suffered untold tortures in being brought here,” and his pale fingers, whose nails had become livid, vainly fumbled at his collar. The faithful wife tenderly loosened the band, which appeared to almost strangle him. “Georgie,” he continued to his wife, “where is Spunyarn? I must speak with him at once.”

He who had been his faithful friend from youth to middle age stepped forward and bent his head over the mouth of the dying

man, for he was dying. For several seconds Haggard whispered a hurried communication to his friend, while the bystanders, including the old lord and Haggard's wife, stood aside, so as not to interrupt the privacy of the communication. Ever and anon Haggard paused for breath.

“Shirtings,” he said at last, “you will remember?”

“I will see to it, be assured of that,” replied his friend, Lord Spunyarn. And then Haggard motioned the old earl to his side, and addressed him with considerable effort.

They had dragged forward a couple of oaken benches, and had placed them one under either end of the hurdle upon which Haggard lay. There was a dead silence in the great entrance hall, only broken by a loud succession of regular ticks, caused by Haggard's life blood, which in great drops fell upon the tessellated pavement below with a monotonously dreadful sound.

“Good-bye, my lord,” he said simply, as

with an effort he stretched out his hand, which was affectionately grasped by the trembling fingers of the old nobleman. "I am going," he continued, "but you have the boys, my boys."

"Perhaps it's not so bad as you think, Reginald. Assistance will be here shortly. We will move you out of this at once."

"There won't be time, Lord Pit Town. Take care of Lucius."

The dying man's eyes fell upon his wife, and a smile passed over his pale face. "Georgie," he gasped out with an effort, "say you forgive me and I shall die easier."

"Reginald," she whispered, "I have nothing to forgive, but," she added through her sobs, "there is something I must tell you."

"I know it, Georgie. I have known it all along. Kiss me, dear," he added with an effort, and with the kiss his spirit passed away.

Reginald Haggard was dead, stricken down

ere he could succeed to the title and estates which would have been his in the ordinary course of nature; but as the aged earl turned away from the body of the man who had been his heir, his eye fell upon the two young men, and motioning to Lucius he said in a broken voice, "Give me your arm, boy; you're all I have left in the world now."

All sign of grief left Lucius Haggard's face at this public notification of his change of position. He drew himself up proudly, and deferentially led the old man away. But young George Haggard didn't hear the words; he stood staring at his dead father, like a man in a dream.

"Is there no hope?" he said to those who crowded round the hurdle upon which the body lay. The ominous tick of the falling blood had ceased now, and as if in answer to the young fellow's question, the dead man's jaw fell, disclosing the white teeth. Then George Haggard turned

to his mother, and at a sign from Spun-yarn he led her from the spot.

As soon as Mrs. Haggard found herself alone, she gave way to her natural grief. The hero of her girlish dreams had been snatched from her suddenly, so suddenly that she could hardly realize that he was actually gone from her for ever. She had continued to idolize the man and to remain unaware of his many deficiencies and failings, from the very moment he had first courted her in the rose garden at King's Warren until his death. He had been a fairly good husband to her, as husbands go, and she had never ceased to love him with a trusting affection. But bewildered as she was by the suddenness of her affliction, she could not help pondering over the strange communication he had made to her upon his death-bed.

“I have known it all along!” What had he known all along? Had he known that Lucius, instead of being his own son

was but the bastard child of Lucy Warrender? Surely not. What could he mean, if he had known it all along, by his solemn adjuration to old Lord Pit Town to take care of Lucius. There could be but one interpretation to that, surely that he looked upon the boy as his eldest son, his heir, his first-born child. Why had her husband asked her to forgive him on his death-bed? Forgive him what? He had not bade good-bye to either of the young fellows, but then death had probably come upon him unawares. Could it possibly be that her dead husband, man of the world as he was, could have deliberately, for the mere sake of her cousin's honour, sacrificed the future of his only son designedly, and without that son's consent? That supposition was beyond even Georgina Haggard's credulity.

There was a mystery in the matter, a mystery she could not fathom. The more she thought over it, the more difficult she found it to attempt to arrive at any

possible solution. Was it merely that he feared that George, being really his only child, that at the boy's death without heirs the Pit Town title and the Pit Town wealth should descend to some remote branch of the family, and so perhaps he may of a purpose have placed the second good young life between the old lord and his distant relatives? But that was hardly likely, for such a contingency could never happen till George was in his grave; and Haggard himself, be it remembered, was a wealthy man.

What then was Lucy Warrender's son to him?

Could it be that he had a stronger, a dearer interest in the child? But she thrust it from her as an unworthy thought; and she strove to banish the phantom she had unwittingly conjured up, by letting her mind return once more to its natural grief, in the thought of her awful bereavement, her sudden widowhood.

Reginald Haggard's death and Reginald Haggard's funeral were a nine days' wonder in the neighbourhood of Walls End Castle. Hundreds of people clad in black attended the ceremony. The old lord, the two young men and Lord Spunyarn were the mourners. The shooting party had been broken up on the day of the accident. A short obituary notice had appeared in the *Times*, and the penny papers had made capital of what they termed "The Shocking Accident in the Shooting Field," while the leader writers had earned their daily three guineas by more or less ingenious strings of the usual platitudes.

Lord Spunyarn was Haggard's sole executor. The will was opened, and commenced with a confirmation of the terms of his marriage settlement; it then proceeded to give a further legacy to his wife of half his property for her lifetime, and he made his "dear son, George Haggard," his residuary

legatee; "my son, Lucius Haggard," the document continued, "being otherwise provided for as the heir to the entailed estates of Lord Pit Town."

It was all plain sailing, and the will was a very natural one for a man in Haggard's position to make.

Lord Spunyarn, who was still staying on at the Castle, waited for twenty-four hours after the funeral, and then he demanded a private interview with his friend's widow.

"I am sorry to trouble you, dear Mrs. Haggard, about business matters," he said as he entered the little boudoir which years ago had been devoted by the old lord to young Mrs. Haggard's use, "but I am compelled to worry you with a long and painful conversation on family matters. My dear lady," he continued, "I should have been the very last person to trouble you with the communication which I am about to make, had it not been my friend's dying wish and command."

“Sit down, Lord Spunyarn, sit down,” she said, “nothing you can have to tell me can be more painful than the suspense, suspicion, and anxiety of mind which I have endured for the last few days. Tell me the worst at once. I have nothing to forgive my husband. When on his death-bed he asked for my forgiveness, I feared that there was something dreadful to come; but I fully and freely forgave him, Lord Spunyarn, and whatever you may have to tell, it will not alter my affection for his memory.”

“Dear Mrs. Haggard,” said the philanthropist, with a little sigh, “the matter concerns the future, as well as the past; the secret has been well kept, and my poor friend has done his duty in providing for his son George, and for you. I must tell you that at one time I had my suspicions, but the thing seemed in itself so monstrous, so improbable, that I put it from me as an unworthy thought.

When your late husband whispered those last words to me as he was dying, he informed me that I was his executor, and told me to examine a little red box that I should find at his banker's, and then to tell you everything. I obtained the box; I have examined it, and it is here." As he said the words, he placed a little red morocco box upon the table.



CHAPTER V.

A LITTLE RED BOX.

I DON'T think Lord Spunyarn could have really found it cold in Mrs. Haggard's boudoir in the second week of September ; perhaps it was for the sake of collecting his ideas that he busied himself with the fire and added another toy log to the flickering embers upon the dainty hearth ; then he sat down, and staring straight at the little red morocco box upon the table, he began.

“I think it may perhaps spare your feelings a little, dear Mrs. Haggard, if I tell you that from what my poor friend said, and from the contents of this box, I have become aware of the secret of Lucius's birth.” He never took his eyes off the box for one instant, or he

would have seen as he said the words that the widow's face grew white as the lawn cuffs upon her wrists.

She interrupted him suddenly.

"It is not I who have betrayed the secret. I have guarded it faithfully for twenty years, God forgive me," she added with a sigh. "But what could I do? I was bound to shield my cousin, even if I had not sworn to her to do so; for she would not take my word for it, Lord Spunyarn. No hint of it has ever passed my lips. Conceive my astonishment when my dying husband told me that he was aware of the fact, for I suppose it was that he meant, when he said to me, with almost his last breath, that he had 'known it all along.'"

"Yes," said her husband's old friend, still staring at the little red box, "and then?"

"And then he died, Lord Spunyarn," she said with a sigh; "but he had asked

me to forgive him, and to take care of Lucius."

"And did you forgive him, dear madam?"

"Of course I forgave him."

"And you forgive him still?"

"Certainly, though what it was he wished me to forgive I cannot tell."

But Lord Spunyarn never looked at her; he only stared at the box upon the table. "I'm glad you forgave him," he said, "fully and freely."

"Fully and freely," she echoed.

"Mrs. Haggard, you had much to forgive. When you promised to take care of Lucius, had you any idea whose son he was?"

"No, Lord Spunyarn, nor have I now; poor Lucy would never tell me that, and I never pressed her, for it did not concern me."

"It concerned you very nearly, dear madam."

Their eyes met, and those of the widow

were filled with mingled astonishment and horror.

“No, Lord Spunyarn; do not tell me that Lucius’s father was——” and her eyes flashed with indignant rage.

“It is best to get it over—*he was your husband!*”

There was a dead silence of some seconds.

“Go on, Lord Spunyarn,” said the widow in a hollow voice; “then I am guiltless at least of deceiving him for years. It is horrible!” But she shed no tear.

“Your husband, dear lady, when he was dying, gave it in charge to me to let you see the contents of this box, which, he too truly said, would explain all. I, too, at times, had my suspicions; for remember this, I too loved your cousin long ago, and your husband was my dearest friend.” The man buried his face in his hands and was silent for a moment; he pulled himself together with an effort. “When I saw

what the box contained, the whole ghastly secret was laid bare to me in an instant. You remember when we were in Rome, by chance, by merest chance, I saw your husband at a masked ball with a lady ; at that ball arose the quarrel between your husband and the unfortunate Frenchman who fell by his hand. The box will tell you the rest. The masked lady wore a magnificent pair of single-stone diamond earrings." Spunyarn unlocked the box, placed it in front of his friend's widow and walked to the window.

With trembling fingers Mrs. Haggard opened it. There was a little packet of letters in Lucy Warrender's undeveloped girlish hand, the ink of which had faded ; then a pair of single-stone brilliant earrings, which sparkled and shimmered in the firelight, as the widow took them in her trembling fingers ; to one of them was still attached the duplicate of the *Mont de Piété*, dated the very day of her cousin's death.

Last of all was a little purple velvet case on which was her husband's monogram with the single word "Rome," and a date just over twenty years ago. She opened it with difficulty; in it was a lovely miniature, not a mere photographer's likeness, of her cousin Lucy in all the pride of her girlish beauty, as a shepherdess, in powdered hair and in a Watteau costume. The face seemed to smile at her with an air of insolent triumph, that old smile of Lucy's which her cousin remembered so well in the days gone by, but which she had missed for many a long year. The painter had not forgotten to place in the ears of the shepherdess a pair of single-stone earrings; in the hand was the ordinary black silk vizard worn at masquerades, and the shepherdess was depicted in the act of unmasking. Nothing more pretty, nothing more piquant, nothing more *chic* could be imagined. The widow placed the miniature upon the table, and

as she did so a single object still remaining in the box caught her eye. It was only a little black silk mask, and from the two holes in the toy, in her disordered imagination, the eyes of her dead cousin still seemed to sparkle with a mocking light. She dropped the miniature into the box and closed the lid which shut out the horrid phantom.

As the box closed with an angry click, Lord Spunyarn turned towards the victim of her husband's perfidy.

“There is no need of explanation ; my husband was right. I understand it all, but I forgave him, Lord Spunyarn, and I forgive him still. Poor Lucius !”

This was all she said.

Spunyarn resumed his seat at the fireside. Then there was a long silence, which neither seemed disposed to break.

At last with an effort he spoke. “What is to be done, dear madam ? I wish the secret had remained in the dead man's

keeping ; it is a dreadful responsibility. Can it be still kept ? ”

“ It is my duty towards my dead husband, Lord Spunyarn,” she said decisively.

“ But you have another duty, dear lady ; a duty to your son and a duty to the old man here, who looks on Lucius as his heir.”

“ My son must suffer with me, Lord Spunyarn, for his father’s fault.”

Spunyarn shook his head. “ Not so, dear lady ; there is but one way, one possible way, to preserve the reputation of those who are gone and to do justice, for justice must be done. Pit Town must know ; for others, taking the lowest standpoint, may possess the secret, and the honour of the family must not be compromised. Lucius must efface himself, that is the only course.”

“ Efface himself, Lord Spunyarn ? I know the boy, the orphan boy ; he was my husband’s child ; and with all his faults I love

him ; he will never consent to that ; he would die first," said Reginald Haggard's widow.

"And die he must, I mean socially. There is no other way."

"He will never consent, Lord Spunyarn," repeated the widow. "He is wrapped up in the fact that he is Lord Pit Town's heir. With George it is different ; he is my own son, my very son," she added bitterly, "and, if I wish it, he will give up everything for my sake and his father's ; his father's honour is as dear to him as it is to me. Besides, my husband evidently foresaw the dilemma in which he has placed us, and made the boy his heir."

"But justice, dear lady, justice——"

"Justice, Lord Spunyarn," cried the indignant woman as she rose to her feet. "God's justice, do you mean, or man's? Is it not enough that my husband should have betrayed and befooled me for twenty years, and should have robbed my boy of his very

heritage, and more than that, of half the treasure of a mother's love? For I tell you, strange and unnatural as it may seem, that I love Lucius; ay, I love him, though he is poor Lucy's child and my husband's bastard. And who could help loving the poor helpless, friendless, neglected child? Yes, I acted the love at first, Lord Spunyarn, and it grew upon me till it became a part of myself. Is it for nothing, that when my husband was bleeding to death before my very eyes, that he bade me take care of Lucius? I have been a faithful and obedient wife, Lord Spunyarn, and I will obey my husband's last behest to the letter. I will protect his son's interests and his son's rights."

"Alas, he has no rights, dear madam," said Spunyarn gently.

"The secret, Lord Spunyarn, is not yours or mine; it is my husband's and hers," she added, pointing to the box. "When she made me swear to keep her secret, she

threatened to haunt me should I betray her. How could I answer her? It was a girl's idle jest, I know; but I did swear it, God knows how unwillingly, and Heaven help me I will keep my oath. Yes, I will keep my oath," here she sank into a chair, and covering her face with her hands, wept bitterly.

Lord Spunyarn paced the room in doubt. He was a man of principle, a religious man, a man of honour—strange combination forsooth in this nineteenth century, and he remembered that his mouth was closed. But was he, a good man, to stand idly by and see a great wrong done? Was he to see the honours and title of a noble family descend to a bastard through the secret machinations of an artful woman? Heaven forbid!

"Think it over, dear madam, think it over," he said; "let me beg you, at least, to sleep on it, and God give you counsel," he added in a broken voice, and then leaving the little red box and its contents

upon the table where it lay, he hurriedly left the room.

While the interview which has been described was taking place, the two young men were walking briskly up and down the great avenue, which was already yellowing with commencing autumn.

It was Lucius who spoke.

“We have changed places, George, with a vengeance; it is I who am the pauper now. If my father meant to surprise me, he certainly succeeded. You are the man of property, George, while I am rich only in expectations. Thank goodness, neither my father, the old man, nor any one else can keep me out of the title and the entailed property; but there may be a deuce of a long time to wait. By Jove! you know these very old men don’t die, they dry up. Why, look at grandfather Warrender. It’s a horrid nuisance this mourning, though I shall be heartily glad when I have to go into black

next time. His lordship is a decided obstructionist ;" so spoke the elder brother, as he blew a big cloud of smoke into the air.

"Don't pretend to be a brute, Lucius ; you don't mean it, you know, old fellow," said George.

"But I do mean it, though. There's no more ridiculous custom than mourning. It's a monstrous thing and ought to be done away with by act of parliament, like suttee in India was—we could see the absurdity of that. We have a kind of modified suttee here. Why, look at mother ! Why should she have to dress herself like a guy ? It's a ridiculous custom, I say. Why should I have to wear black gloves in order that I may exhibit my woe by the stains on my fingers ? And why should I be compelled to look like a British working man out for a holiday, and pass the greater part of my time in flicking the dust off my clothes ? I've been badly treated, George,

and now I find myself pitchforked into a ridiculous position. Here I am, heir to a title and any amount of coin, and without a farthing I can call my own. I wonder whether the old man will think fit to make me an allowance; he gave Hetton a big one, I have always heard. Do you suppose I offended the governor, George?"

"No; the will was made several years ago, you know, when we were boys."

"Well, it's uncommonly rough. Anyhow, you'll allow that, I suppose; and I confess I don't care for the *rôle* of a waiter upon Providence. The only thing I seem to have inherited at all is Capt, and I shall rid myself of him at the earliest opportunity; he must have saved a pile of money; he ought to go back to Switzerland and start an hotel. They all do, I believe, when they don't cut their master's throats as Courvoisier did. By Jove! I wonder whether Capt would lend me any money? If he won't, I must try the Jews. Why, since the

governor died, I've been inundated with circulars from the house of Israel."

"You needn't trouble about money, Lucius; you can have anything you want from me, you know."

"It's very good of you to say so, George; but as I shall have to go to the Jews sooner or later, it's hardly worth while spunging upon you. I may as well take the bull by the horns at once. Though, between ourselves, I don't see why my mother shouldn't do something for me, and so circumvent the governor's injustice. You and she got all the plunder between you."

"Don't talk like that, Lucius. It's not right. It's hard on you, very hard; but I wouldn't have anything to do with money-lenders if I were you."

"Oh, of course not; that's the good advice all you wealthy fellows always give us poor devils; it's the way of the world."

"You're not fair, Lucius; we are both under age, but this you can rely on, till

you come into your own, at all events, you're welcome to share my purse."

"Do you really mean that, George?"

"Of course I mean it, or I shouldn't say it."

"I didn't believe you were half the good fellow that you are, my boy. Let's shake hands on it," and the two young fellows shook hands, but George's generosity was a bitter pill indeed to Lucius Haggard.

Mr. Maurice Capt did not find himself comfortable under the new *régime*. He was still Mr. Haggard's man, but things were changed; he disliked his new master, and his sharp eyes soon detected that the dislike was more than reciprocated. When Lucy Warrender died, what he looked upon as a legitimate source of income he suddenly found closed to him for ever. The proprietor of a valuable secret is naturally anxious to secure the best return possible from his property, but unfortunately in Mr. Capt's case dividends may be said to have ceased. As he turned the matter over in

his mind he disliked his investment more and more. It seemed to have assumed the aspect of a very unpromising property indeed. What was he to do? The terms of Reginald Haggard's will were no secret to him, for, in his first rage and mortification, the young Lucius had confided his woes to his late father's confidential servant. Should he, the valet, hang on at Walls End Castle for an indefinite period, until Lucy Warrender's son should come into the old lord's property, when he would be able to recommence the blackmailing process which he had so successfully carried out upon the young man's mother? He knew enough of the character of Lucius Haggard to feel certain that the power he would possess in such a case would be boundless. But Mr. Capt was no longer a young man; he, like his master, might die suddenly, and then the secret would die with him. That miserable anticipation filled him with horror and indignation. Should he go to the widow, inform her that

he shared her secret, and, for a good round sum in ready money, sell his silence, and of course betray her as soon as he found it convenient to do so? Should he go to the old earl, and make the best bargain he could under the circumstances? He was torn by conflicting doubts. Mr. Capt had an observant eye ; he had noticed that there had been an exciting interview between the widow and her late husband's executor, and he became aware of the fact that a little red morocco box, which in the old days had usually accompanied his master upon his travels, had passed into Mrs. Haggard's personal custody. Intuitively, he correctly jumped to the conclusion, that in some way or other, the red morocco box was connected with the secret of Lucius Haggard's birth. Mr. Capt felt then that it was his duty, as a prudent man, to ascertain the nature of the contents of the box, or even to obtain possession of it. Promptitude as well as firmness had characterised every action of Mr. Capt's

life ; with him to determine was to execute, and he made up his mind not to rest until he had mastered the secret of the box, and that his subsequent action should be guided by the information so obtained.

Reginald Haggard was a wise man, a man who burnt his letters, a man who was as a rule untroubled by sentiment. The one episode in his early life over which, to him, there had still hung a sort of unhealthy halo of romance, was the affair with Lucy Warrender. Many a time and oft had common sense urged him to commit the contents of the little red box to the flames ; but he knew too well that somehow or another his wife had become the involuntary accomplice of her cousin's fault. He had not burned the contents of the box ; if he had done so the secret, as far as he was concerned, would probably have died with him ; but he had not burned it. Hence his whispered death-bed confession to his friend Spunyarn, and his appeal to his wife for forgiveness.

Mrs. Haggard had turned the matter over in her mind again and again. To her it seemed unnecessary to rake up an old scandal, at least during Lord Pit Town's life; the propriety of letting sleeping dogs lie commended itself very strongly to her mind. She herself was quite convinced that when it became necessary to communicate the secret to young Lucius Haggard things would right themselves without a scandal. Of course Lucius would do what was right, and so would George for the matter of that. Spunyarn's suggestion that Lucius Haggard should "efface himself," and so voluntarily suffer a social death, seemed to her but a brutal and inhuman method of cutting the Gordian knot. She had never again opened the little red box, since she had closed it on the occasion of her interview with her husband's executor. To her mind the simplest thing of all would have been to do away with the box and its contents, but she gave way to the better judgment of Spunyarn in this matter. On one

thing, however, she was determined: by no act of hers should her dead cousin's shameful secret be dragged into the light of day; and so she made up her mind to communicate her decision to Spunyarn, and to deliver the box to him for safety.

Lord Spunyarn's reflections upon the whole matter convinced him of one thing—his own unenviable position. To his mind the matter was thoroughly clear, and his own duty peremptorily defined. He had received the secret as a death bed confidence; there could be no doubt as to the mystery of Lucius Haggard's birth. It was certainly not for him to stand calmly by and see the Pit Town title and the Pit Town estates pass to Reginald Haggard's bastard son. It was his duty to take the old lord into his confidence and to break the matter to the brothers. His own evidence and that of George's mother, coupled with the contents of the box, would set the facts at rest beyond a doubt. If young Lucius

were an honourable man he would not attempt to make matters worse by a useless contest in the Law Courts, but would doubtless of his own accord see the wisdom of disappearing into an honourable obscurity, while Lord Pit Town and George Haggard would, of course, provide for him. He felt assured that having had time for reflection Mrs. Haggard herself would inevitably consent to this, the only possible course of action. As to her scruples respecting her cousin's secret, they would be overcome. It was then with a mind fully made up that Lord Spunyarn demanded a second interview with his dead friend's widow, and he requested young Lucius Haggard to await his summons to speak with them "on a matter which," as he phrased it, "concerns you nearly."

He found Mrs. Haggard comparatively cheerful.

"I have thought it all over, Lord Spunyarn," she said. "You were my husband's

friend. I place myself in your hands unreservedly."

Spunyarn gave a sigh of relief, and then he proceeded to sketch the course of action which we have given above.

"We will tell no one, dear Mrs. Haggard. George himself need never know. The whole thing can be a simple matter of arrangement. Of course Lucius must know all, and Pit Town. I purpose to break it to Lucius at once, and to him at least your cousin's name need never be mentioned. He is his father's son after all."

"His father's son," she said with a sigh. "Yes, his father's son," she repeated with meaning. "Must it be done to-day?"

"Don't let us procrastinate, dear lady. Shall I send for him? He is awaiting our summons."

The widow nodded, and Spunyarn went to seek the youth, who in a few minutes was to be stripped of name and fame and wealth.

So far from suspecting a communication of an unpleasant nature, young Lucius Haggard, his face wreathed in anticipatory smiles, was impatiently drumming upon the window-pane in the library with his finger-tips. It seemed to him that this formal interview with his mother and his father's executor could have but one object, namely, to announce to him that a suitable provision was to be made for the heir to the Pit Town title during the short time that must necessarily elapse ere he should come into his heritage. But his anticipations were considerably damped by Lord Spun-yarn's first words. The elder man placed his hand affectionately upon the young fellow's shoulder.

“Lucius, my poor boy,” he said, “prepare yourself for a surprise, and a great disappointment,” he added ominously.

The happy smile of anticipation left the young fellow's face as he heard the words.

“Well, Lord Spunyarn,” he said, “when my father cut me off without even the proverbial shilling, I thought he had done the worst he could for me.”

Lord Spunyarn took no notice of the remark.

“My poor fellow,” he said, “steel yourself to hear what I have to tell you. I will tell you now,” he added, “to spare your poor mother the pain and horror of having the sad story repeated in her presence. Lucius,” he said solemnly, “you are no longer the heir to the Pit Town title, and all that goes with it.”

“Good heavens!” cried the young man as he sank into a chair, “it can’t be true. Did Hetton contract a secret marriage, and is there a son? Does the old man know of it?”

“It isn’t that, Lucius. Compose yourself,” Spunyarn added after a short pause, “and listen to what I have to tell you. This thing concerns you and your brother

only. Lucius, bear it like a man, but, my poor boy, you are illegitimate."

"Did my mother dare——" he began, but Spunyarn stopped him with a gesture.

"Lucius," he said severely, "the lady who has allowed you to call her mother from the time you were a little child, did so out of kindness; speak no ill word of her, my boy, for to her you owe everything, to her love, and to her forbearance."

"Great God! Lord Spunyarn, it can't be true, there is some base plot in the matter. Who is the heir, the man who calls himself the heir, I mean?" he asked fiercely, and he clenched his hands; and his eyes, Lucy Warrender's eyes, sparkled with mingled rage and hate. "We shall contest the thing, of course?"

"The heir, Lucius, the rightful heir, is your brother George; he was born in wedlock, while you, alas, though your father's son, are——"

“Not base born; don’t say that, Lord Spunyarn.”

But Spunyarn nodded sadly.

“I won’t believe it, Lord Spunyarn,” almost shouted the young man with uncontrollable fury. “Have you, my father and my mother, been hatching this infernal plot between you all these years? Can the dead man’s hand strike me, even from beyond the grave? I won’t believe it, it isn’t true. I’ll fight it in the Courts. What does Lord Pit Town say? Does he give a tacit consent to my undoing?”

“Pit Town as yet knows nothing. Lucius, try to be calm. Listen to me,” and as gently as he could he broke to the indignant boy the dismal fact of his heritage of shame, that he was but Reginald Haggard’s love-child after all.”

“And my mother?” said the boy in a broken voice.

“No need to speak of her, Lucius; she is dead.”

“Have you the proofs, Lord Spunyarn, of all this?” said the boy more calmly, after he had listened to Spunyarn’s narrative in silence. “It’ll have to be proved, you know, proved to the hilt; that at least is my right, and I’ll not forego it.”

“Lucius, you have no rights.”

“I must see the proofs, at least.”

“Yes, you must see them, I suppose, but spare your mother, Lucius; she is broken down with grief and suffering.”

“Lord Spunyarn,” said the boy coldly, “you say she is not my mother; why should I spare the feelings of my father’s accomplice? Feelings forsooth;” and he laughed bitterly.

“Lucius, you are mad. Let me beseech you, as a gentleman, in the painful interview that must take place, to spare your father’s widow as much as possible. Deal gently with her, boy; it is she who has been the victim in the whole matter.”

“Don’t bandy words with me, Lord Spun-

yarn," cried the young man, and for the moment the impetuous Reginald Haggard of bygone years seemed to stand before the astonished nobleman in the very flesh. "You tell me," he continued in a calmer tone, "that George Haggard is the heir, that I am but my father's base-born child. Show me the proofs of this and I'll believe it; till then, Lord Spunyarn, I simply say you lie," and the young man bowed defiantly. "Let us go," he continued, "to the clever woman who has hoodwinked me for a lifetime. I follow you, sir."

Lord Spunyarn made no reply, but led the way to the widow's boudoir.

As they entered, Mrs. Haggard rose and opened her arms to Lucius, but she sunk again into her chair, staring with sad astonishment at the extraordinary transformation that had been suddenly effected in the young man. His dead father, in an access of furious passion, seemed to stand before her. No answering look of

affection was upon his face; the young mouth was firmly set, and the eyes glittered with savage defiance.

“Lucius,” she said with an effort, “dear Lucius.”

“Madam,” he replied, as, uninvited, he seated himself with an attempt at dignity, “his lordship has inflicted upon me a strange and improbable story. I have told him, and I do honestly believe it, that that wild story is a lie, a wicked lie. He tells me that you hold the proofs. Let me then see these proofs, that I may make him my humble apologies, and go out from your presence into the world a nameless beggar. But you will please remember that you will find it difficult to deceive me, and to deceive Lord Pit Town, for you must cheat us both.”

“Lucius,” said Mrs. Haggard in a broken voice.

But Lord Spunyarn interrupted her. “I had hoped, dear lady,” he said, “to have

spared you such a scene as this; let me deal with him, Mrs. Haggard. The proofs, Lucius," he added, "are here. I myself can supply the few missing links in the chain of evidence. It is but natural, perhaps," he said, "and you have, as you say, a right to see these sad proofs, unhappy boy, of the miserable folly and wickedness of your real parents. Look at them, then; examine them for yourself, and then you cannot fail to be convinced that I have not lied to you after all."

He turned the key in the lock and softly opened the box; then the astonished man gave a sudden start and placed his hand to his forehead.

Young Lucius Haggard rose to his feet, and laughed a loud, indignant, mocking laugh.

The box was empty!

CHAPTER VI.

LUCIUS HAGGARD IS BEWILDERED.

JOHN, Earl of Pit Town, was above all things an art-worshipper. He was never tired of perambulating the great galleries of Pit Town Castle and admiring the collection, which it had been his life-long labour of love to bring together. When his son, the late Lord Hetton, had come to his sudden and dreadful end, the old man had felt the blow severely; when his heir, Reginald Haggard, had been snatched away in the pride of his manhood, it had affected him in a less degree; but he had felt the blow from its very suddenness. Ever since Reginald Haggard's wife had come to live at the Castle, he had ceased to feel that he was alone in the world, and a deep affection had sprung up between the two.

As for Haggard's boys, now bursting into early manhood, he loved them somewhat for themselves, but still more for the sake of the woman who had been a daughter to him, and the stay and comfort of his waning years. Always orderly and methodical, he had settled the ultimate disposition of his property with justice and discretion. He was immensely wealthy. As we have said, the entailed property was extremely large, but was exceeded in actual money value by the great mineral wealth which was disposable by will. The value of several ordinary estates, too, was locked up in the vast collection contained in the new galleries.

The future possessor of the Pit Town title would be a lucky man indeed if he got the treasures so laboriously accumulated, during his long lifetime, by old Lord Pit Town. The old man lived by strict rule. He had a curious theory that, barring accidents, the span of human life

might be ordinarily calculated at sixty-five years ; that is, supposing that one third of the time, or eight hours a day, was given to sleep. He believed, too, that just as the span of life is undoubtedly shortened by indiscretions and excesses, particularly in the matters of diet and drink ; so he considered that span to be indubitably lengthened, if the ordinary rules of common prudence were carefully observed. But Lord Pit Town went further than this. Continual association with Dr. Wolff had converted the old nobleman to an extraordinary and original theory which was held by the doctor of philosophy. This theory was a delightfully simple one. Dr. Wolff was accustomed to sum it up as follows : "The human body is a machine, and would go on working for ever did not certain parts of it gradually wear out. It is our duty to make the machine last as long as possible. When not in use it should be run at the lowest rate of speed, in order

to reduce the rapidity of the deterioration. "If I don't want to wear out my boots," Dr. Wolff would triumphantly remark, "I put on my slippers; therefore, as my body is more precious to me than even my new boots, I never unnecessarily wear it out. A certain minimum amount of exercise is undoubtedly necessary to health; let us take that by all means, but no more. Let us avoid unnecessary exertion of all kinds, physical or mental; let us not ride if we can drive, let us not walk if we can ride, let us not stand when we can sit, and certainly we should not sit if we can lie down; above all things we should not remain awake if we can possibly sleep, and even in sleeping we should, if possible, refrain from dreams. The valuable machine which we are possessed of should be run at the lowest possible speed, that it may last the longer. Strong emotions of all kinds should be just as obnoxious to us as strong drinks. Holding it as an absolute fact

that, barring unavoidable accidents, a certain definite amount of wakefulness is allotted to every man, every opportunity should be seized for running the machine at the lowest possible rate by the simplest means; that is to say, to put it shortly, never remain awake without an object, as you are uselessly expending the allotted time of *Life*, that is to say, of *Wakefulness*."

But Dr. Wolff and his disciple went further than this: they looked upon sleep as the secret recuperative power of nature. They considered that in sleep they had discovered the real *vis medicatrix naturæ*. Their curiosity was aroused as to the success of their theory; they were neither of them particularly anxious to become very old men, except that their doing so would tend to prove the correctness of their views.

Lord Pit Town himself had already reached an almost patriarchal age; he slept and dozed frequently in the daytime, thus carrying out the principles of what the

doctor proudly termed the “Wolffian Theory.” Under no pretext whatever would any servant at Walls End Castle have dared to awaken either the doctor or the old lord ; they were never called in the morning, and in the midst of the most interesting conversations they were both of them in the habit, without the slightest apology, of suddenly closing their eyes and taking a deep draught of what they called nature’s recuperative elixir. Everybody in Walls End Castle knew perfectly well what the servants meant, when they said that either the old lord or his faithful henchman was engaged ; it simply signified that the two human dormice were carrying out the Wolffian Theory.

In sleep they were both accustomed to seek refuge from disturbing influences of all kinds. On the second day of Mrs. Dodd’s visit to the Castle she had seized the opportunity of improving the occasion, when she suddenly came upon the old lord and

the philosopher, each of whom was seated in an easy chair, silently drinking in the beauties of the celebrated Pit Town Turner, which formed one of the gems of the new galleries.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” the energetic lady remarked, as she burst in upon the scene of tranquil enjoyment; “I don’t disturb you, Lord Pit Town?” she said.

“Certainly not, dear madam; nothing disturbs me. I allow nothing to disturb me now.”

“No, nothing disturbs us; nothing short of an earthquake, *Frau Prediger*; it is against our principle, you know, and that is why we don’t rise at your approach,” chimed in the doctor of philosophy; and the eyes of the two gentlemen by common accord left Mrs. Dodd and returned to their meditative contemplation of the great landscape.

Mrs. Dodd was astonished but not abashed; she had never known what it was

to be abashed in the whole course of her life. "Their conduct is very peculiar," she thought. "That German man, if he had the instincts of a gentleman, should at least rise and explain the pictures to me; as for the old lord, I suppose he's in his second childhood. I wonder what '*Frau Prediger*' means?" "Ah, Lord Pit Town," she said, apostrophising the old nobleman and utterly ignoring the obnoxious Wolff, "I must confess to a feeling of sadness when I look at all these beautiful things, and when I think how much might have been done with the vast sums that they must have cost," and she put up her eye-glass and read the descriptive label affixed to the frame of the great Turner. "So that is the celebrated picture," she continued, "and did it really cost four thousand pounds? Oh, Lord Pit Town," she went on, in the tone she might have used to a little child detected red-handed in some act of juvenile depravity, "when we think how much might

have been done with four thousand pounds, when we read in the statistics of the Society for the Conversion of the Jews that it costs little more than four thousand pounds to convert one of that proverbially stiff-necked race, one cannot look at that picture without emotion."

She waited for a moment for the old lord to excuse himself; she looked from the picture to the venerable nobleman; his eyes were tightly shut; he was evidently taking a deep draught of the recuperative elixir. Then she turned in search of sympathy to the man who had called her "*Frau Prediger*;" he too was employed in exactly the same manner. For the first time in her life Mrs. Dodd found herself absolutely and distinctly ignored; she was to these two dreadful men as if she did not exist; it was too much, she turned and fled. As the vicar's wife flung out of the gallery, the two enthusiasts reopened their eyes and resumed their contemplation of Tur-

ner's masterpiece. From this little incident it may be seen that the old lord and his companion were not easily disturbed in the even tenor of their tranquil lives.

Lord Spunyarn's feelings after the stormy interview with young Lucius Haggard were not to be envied. He hated to meddle and to make. It's quite true that he had been forced into his present position by Haggard's dying communication, and it was by no fault of his own that he suddenly found himself mixed up in the exceedingly intricate family affairs of other people. It was an unpleasant position ; he had seen with his own eyes the links of evidence which completed the chain of proof that plainly demonstrated the truth of what his old friend had told him on his death-bed. How and by whom the contents of the little red box had been mysteriously spirited away he was unable to imagine ; certainly not by his friend's widow, for Mrs. Haggard, he knew, was the soul of honour ; certainly

Lucius could have had no hand in the abstraction. It seemed to Spunyarn's mind imperative upon him to communicate the whole matter to the old earl, and so shift the entire responsibility upon the shoulders of the head of the family. Possibly the old lord, as the possessor of unbounded wealth, might be able to make arrangements satisfactory to himself and to the naturally conflicting interests of the two young men. In any case an open scandal must be avoided, and the Pit Town title and estates, whatever might become of the old lord's money, must not be diverted from the legitimate heir. How he wished that he had never accepted that autumn invitation to Pit Town Castle! He knew full well that young Lucius Haggard would not relinquish one tittle of what he considered his rights. It was difficult to escape from the horns of the dilemma. It was quite certain that Mrs. Haggard would not move in the matter, and to let Lucy Warrender's

child rob George Haggard of his birthright seemed to him a crime. The only other alternative being a scandalous trial in open court and the dragging of the whole matter before the public. As a man of the world, Lord Spunyarn was quite aware that a secret ceases to be a secret when there are too many depositaries of it; for this reason he could not even consult the legal advisers of the family. He felt that George Haggard must be told sooner or later: that was a plain duty. He felt, too, that it were better that the boy should learn the secret from him, but the communication of the matter to the old lord was still more imperative, and that communication must be made at once, for Spunyarn well knew that the life of the fragile old nobleman hung by a thread, and that there was no exaggeration in Lucius Haggard's statement that Lord Pit Town might go off at any moment. From what Spunyarn knew of George Haggard and his mother, he felt, in the event

of the old earl's death, that it was more than probable that Lucius Haggard would be allowed to succeed to everything, contrary to all the dictates of human justice. At this thought all Spunyarn's class instincts violently revolted.

Since the very startling communication which had been made to him, Lucius Haggard had thought of nothing else. To be suddenly told that one is a bastard is bad enough even for an ordinary mortal, but to a youth who has considered himself *porphyro-genitus* to be informed that he is but of common clay after all, and, worse than that, base-born, is terrible indeed. Since he had heard the story, young Lucius had been unable to obtain even a sip of the doctor's recuperative elixir. He believed the tale—he couldn't doubt it—for he knew that the woman who had been a mother to him could not lie. So Lucius Haggard believed the story, and his only consolation was that the proofs were missing. Possession

is nine points of the law he very well knew, and he thanked his stars that the *onus probandi*, fortunately for him, lay with those whom he already looked upon as “the other side.” But he could not rest, for the mysterious contents of the box, whatever they had been, might be discovered at any moment, and, like Damocles, he trembled at the suspended sword.

“You’re not looking well, sir,” said Mr. Capt, as he appeared with the dressing materials in the morning. “Won’t you lie a little while longer?” said the valet. “I can bring up your breakfast, sir.”

“I’m all right, Capt. I’ve only had a bad night,” and then the valet drew the curtains, and the young fellow looked once more upon the well-timbered landscape which till yesterday he had regarded as all his own. And then he gave a long sigh, which came from the very bottom of his heart.

“The light seems to hurt your eyes, sir,”

said the valet, as he shut out what had now become a hateful picture.

“I think you’re right, Capt, I’ll have an extra hour’s sleep ; you can leave me, and when I want my breakfast I’ll ring for it,” and Lucius Haggard turned his face to the wall as the valet left the room. But he didn’t attempt to sleep ; he began once more to turn over the matter in his mind and to meditate upon the best course of action to pursue. Should he have an interview with the possessor of his father’s heritage, the heir to what he had once looked upon as his own birthright ? He well knew young George Haggard’s generosity. Should he make a clean breast of the whole matter to George, and propose that come what might, they two should share and share alike by mutual consent ? Of course such a contract would not be legally binding, as he well knew, but he felt that should George consent to such an arrangement, he, the more astute, could break the contract when-

ever he saw fit. If he could only get hold of those papers, or whatever they were, and destroy them, his position would become almost impregnable; he would still remain practically Lord Pit Town's heir. Should the old man be talked over, even he, could not keep him out of the title and the entailed property. Could it be that in her love and affection for him, or in a horror of a scandal being attached to her name or to her dead husband's, that Mrs. Haggard had destroyed what the little red box had once contained? No, he couldn't hope that. To whose interest was it that the proofs, whatever they were, should disappear? To his, and to his alone. But surely no one would commit so stupendous an act of villainy merely to benefit him, or to wrong the man whom he still called his brother? Would Spunyarn lay the whole matter before the old lord? And if he did so would Lord Pit Town take the tale for gospel without proof—proof, the very existence of which was now problematical?

Should he at once go to the earl and pose as the outraged victim of a base conspiracy, with the hope of enlisting the powerful support of the head of the family? The more he thought over all these things, the more was he overwhelmed with a sense of his own impotence. If he could only get hold of what the box had contained and destroy it, he would be comparatively safe; for he felt that even were he to peaceably come into the possession of what he had once considered his own, what a life of doubt and terror would be unquestionably his, so long as those proofs, those dreadful proofs, existed. If the whole strange story were but a fabrication after all—even that was possible. Reginald Haggard was his father; both Lord Spunyarn and Mrs. Haggard had agreed in this. He had always stood much in awe of his father, and had never given him cause of offence. It was strange that, knowing him to be a bastard, his father should have treated him in all things as his legitimate

heir. Why had his father failed to provide for him in any way by will? For the apparently simple reason that he looked upon him as the old lord's natural successor. If it were true that he was but a base-born child, then his father must have been aware of the fact, and he and Mrs. Haggard must have been co-conspirators in an ignoble plot. What possible object could Reginald Haggard have had, and by what possible means could he have induced his wife to be his accomplice in so abominable a crime? As he looked back upon the long years of affection that the woman, who until to-day he had called his mother, had lavished upon him, he became the more bewildered. Could it be possible that the whole matter was but a hallucination of his mother's, caused by her recent bereavement? That supposition wouldn't hold water for a moment, for the philanthropic but notoriously hard-headed Spunyarn had actually seen the proofs, and Spunyarn was an honourable man; and he

well remembered that Spunyarn himself had asserted his power of supplying the missing links in the chain. Was it possible after all that the mysterious contents of the little red box would never be discovered and that he might be still the old man's heir for want of legal proof to the contrary? Such a solution was the best that could be hoped for. He felt more than ever powerless, as he reflected that his future lot remained in the hands of Mrs. Haggard, the woman who in his rage and despair he had insulted by base suspicion and met by an open defiance. That was a mistake, he saw it now but too clearly. But the mistake was not irreparable. Gradually the policy he should pursue became more and more clearly marked out in his troubled mind. "I will not quarrel with them," he thought; "I will express my readiness to do what is right, and should the contents of the box be ever forthcoming, then I must trust to their generosity. That is the simplest and safest way, the only

wise course and the only prudent one ; she may after all be bound to secrecy," he thought.

And then he rang for his breakfast, and afterwards proceeded to interview his father's friend. He found Lord Spunyarn in what had been called Reginald Haggard's own room. When Lucius entered it, Lord Spunyarn was engaged with a mass of papers.

"Spunyarn," he said abruptly, "I owe you an apology ; I behaved badly yesterday. Forgive me," he continued, as he held out his hand, "I behaved badly enough to you," he went on, "but I behaved worse to my mother, for I must call her my mother still," he added in a broken voice.

Spunyarn rose and took the offered hand. "Say no more, Lucius, I'm glad you thought better of it. After all it was a terrible position for you, my poor boy, a terrible position for us all," he continued, "and for her especially."

"There's one thing I have to say to you,

Lord Spunyarn," said Lucius, and the crafty young fellow spoke the words gracefully and trippingly; "in this matter I can only place my interests and my honour unreservedly in your hands. You were my father's friend, Lord Spunyarn, and you are his widow's and mine. It is for you, then, to say what is to be done."

"One thing must be done, Lucius; the honour of the family and of the dead," he added solemnly, "must be respected."

"That of course," said the young fellow, as he seated himself and fixed his eyes upon the carpet.

"You will ask for nothing but what is just, Lucius; you would not wish to see your brother wronged?"

"Surely not, Lord Spunyarn, surely not."

"It'll have to be done, I suppose, sooner or later, and perhaps it's better done now. I don't think I could rake up all the miserable story in your mother's presence, Lucius, but you have a right to hear it. A good

deal of the sad little drama was enacted before my very eyes. I once loved your mother, Lucius, your real mother, and I wanted to make her my wife. Lucius, don't ask me to name her—she is dead, poor girl. Try to think of your mother, Lucius, as the life-long victim of a girlish folly, as one who paid very dearly for her fault. Let us speak of her no more. I will tell you all you need know. I must tell you, or you would not be able to take in the situation. Just before you were born, Lucius, your mother, who was a dear friend of the much-wronged woman who sacrificed herself for you, feeling that her condition could be no longer concealed, appealed to your father's wife to save her from the consequences of her fault. Remember, Lucius, that Mrs. Haggard had no inkling of the truth that her friend's lover was her own husband. She never knew it, poor thing, till he was in his grave. If she chose to make the great sacrifice demanded of her, it was in her power to save

her friend's reputation, and your mother, Lucius, was her dearest friend. She made the sacrifice, but when she made it she little knew the price she would have to pay, for in sacrificing herself, she sacrificed the rights of her own then unborn son ; and for twenty years that poor woman supposed that she was deceiving, tricking and wronging your father. But it was not so, Lucius, for your father was aware of the whole conspiracy from the very first. Your mother's letters proved that, and the box contained further evidence, which rendered doubt upon the subject impossible. But when my poor friend was on his death-bed, Mrs. Haggard could be silent no longer. She, the woman who had sacrificed her whole life for the sake of a girlish friendship, on his death-bed, asked the forgiveness of the man who had wronged her. Then, and then only, with his dying breath, your father revealed to her that he had been a consenting party to the fraud and aware of it from the first. And then

she forgave him, Lucius. What was she to do, poor thing? At your father's dying request, I, as his executor, having come into possession of the secret, handed the proofs to my friend's widow."

"And you saw those proofs, Lord Spunyarn?"

"Yes, I saw them, Lucius."

The young man rose. "Then, Lord Spunyarn," he said, "there is but one course open to me. As a man of honour I place myself freely and fully in your hands. Whatever you think is the right course to pursue, that course I will follow; for I feel, as you told me yesterday, that I have no rights. My very presence here as my father's bastard, is an insult to her whom, I would to heaven, I could still call my mother, and to the head of the family. I can say no more than this, Lord Spunyarn—I place myself in your hands."

Spunyarn took the young fellow by the hand affectionately. "Lucius," said he, "you

are behaving nobly. But the dilemma is none the less; the proofs, unfortunately, have disappeared. I know full well that you will never have cause to regret your generosity. Pray God that we may yet be able to avoid a public scandal. I have sent for Brookes; he is, as you know, the old lord's lawyer, and to him we must come sooner or later. If we could only get the contents of the box once more into our possession, all would be simple enough; but the proofs have disappeared, perhaps for ever; and my poor friend's wife, Lucius, is smitten by a terrible affliction; they found her speechless this morning, and the family practitioner tells me she may never recover. God knows," he added with a groan, "perhaps the hand of heaven has closed her mouth for ever."

"You don't say that she is ill, Lord Spunyarn, perhaps dying?" cried the young man in an awe-stricken whisper, as he repressed his exultation with an effort. "Let

me see her at once. Poor mother!" he added with a sigh.

I verily believe that should fortune desert young Lucius Haggard he need never really starve, for his talents as a light comedian should certainly be worth several guineas a week to him.

"Spunyarn," said Lucius after a pause, "who can have taken these papers? Have you any suspicion?"

"It's a mystery I cannot penetrate," he replied. "Brookes may be able to get at the bottom of it, however; I hope and trust so."

"Can it be possible," said Lucius, "that my mother destroyed the papers herself, or has secreted them?"

"I hardly think so; she seemed as much astonished as I was, when we found them gone. Besides, why should she destroy them? Lucius, she trusted you; and she judged you rightly, my boy; you have chosen the only honourable and manly

course. No man has cause to regret running straight in this world. You will never have reason to repent of it, Lucius."

"Do you think no one outside the family, Lord Spunyarn, by any possibility can be in possession of the key to the secret?"

"No one. Besides it interests no one, save my dear old friend, your brother, and yourself."

"Yes, I suppose after all George is my brother, in a sort of way, still."

"George will never forget that he is your brother, Lucius."

There was a pause.

"Let us go to her," said Lucius Haggard with a sigh.

The elder man consented, and they left the room.



CHAPTER VII.

ENTER MR. BROOKES.

WHEN Lord Spunyarn and Lucius entered Mrs. Haggard's room they found her stretched upon a sofa, and to the inexperienced eye she presented very much her ordinary appearance; but as the young fellow, who had been nursed and tended by the invalid when he was a helpless friendless child, gazed upon the woman who had been a mother to him, he saw that one corner of the mouth was slightly drawn. The old lord was seated by her side; her left hand was clasped in his; the marks of recent tears were on the face of the old nobleman, and he roused himself with an effort to welcome his heir.

“Mother,” said the young fellow, as he took her other hand, “poor mother!” And

even the long-headed youth felt a pang, as he gazed upon the wreck before him.

An answering smile illumined the suffering face as she heard the greeting.

Then there was a pause of some length ; and then the old man made his moan, for the selfishness of age is as natural as the selfishness of childhood. This is what the possessor of countless wealth, and of all the heart could desire to obtain, said in his cracked querulous old voice :

“ All gone from me, wife and son, and nephews, all taken ; and now she is stricken down, the joy of my dotage, the comfort of my old age. It’s very hard to bear,” groaned the old man, and the hollow old eyes became moist again. But there was an answering pressure from the slender hand which he held between his wrinkled fingers, and the old man’s face was lighted up once more by a happy smile. “ You won’t leave me, Georgie,” he continued, “ for I can’t spare you, my dear, I can’t spare you.”

Again there came the same answering pressure. But she spoke no word ; heaven had set the seal of silence on her lips ; they moved, those pale lips, but no sound came from them ; and then the sufferer made an impatient gesture. As she did so young George Haggard entered the room ; his eyes were red with weeping and he trod daintily upon the carpet, as a man would do who feared to disturb a sleeping child. The sick woman smiled as he came to his brother's side and affectionately placed his hand upon Lucius Haggard's shoulder ; her eyes sought those of Lord Spunyarn, dwelt upon his an instant, and then the lids closed upon the yet lovely orbs, and still smiling, like a tired child, Mrs. Haggard sank into a peaceful sleep.

No word was spoken by those around the couch ; they sat silent, fearing to disturb her slumber. As Lucius Haggard gazed upon the sweet sleeping face, he was racked by torturing doubt. How would it all end ? Would

she recover her bodily health again? The mind was evidently still uninjured. *Would she ever speak again?* That was the important question to Lucius Haggard. The papers gone and the mouth of this one witness closed, he felt himself comparatively safe; still in the eyes of the law and of the world his father's lawful heir. But should she speak again, she might communicate the secret of his shame. Without her evidence all that Lord Spunyarn might say could but be mere surmise, a simple *ex parte* statement.

One by one they left her sleeping, the old earl leaning heavily on the arm of Haggard's eldest son. And then they separated; the old lord to his slumbers and his dreams and the society of the faithful Wolff, the two young fellows to the park, to wander up and down the great avenue side by side, and talk with bated breath over their fresh misfortune, the affliction that had befallen their mother; while Lord Spun-

yarn returned to the examination of the mass of papers lying on the dead Reginald Haggard's table, and to wait with impatience the arrival of the family solicitor.

“If there is a thing in this world that I hate,” said old Mr. Brookes to his partner, as he sat in his cosy private room in Lincoln’s Inn Fields that morning, “it’s this modern system of telegrams; they’re almost as bad as a doctor’s night-bell. You have to go, whether you like it or not. Here’s probably some simple matter of common law. Why on earth can’t he write? Not a bit of it, he simply wires me, and I have to go,” and he handed a telegram across the table:

“Walls End Castle.

“Please come down at once. Your presence urgently needed.

“SPUNYARN.”

“Why can’t they write?”

That afternoon saw old Mr. Brookes at the Castle. He dined *tête-à-tête* with Lord Spunyarn, and did full justice to the cook's efforts. Lawyers are always epicures, and Mr. Brookes condescended to praise the *suprême de volaille* of the Walls End *chef*. After dinner they drew their chairs to the fire, and then Lord Spunyarn opened his business.

“I'm glad you have come, Brookes; I'm very glad you've come.”

“Something very serious, I suppose; something so urgent, Lord Spunyarn, that you couldn't have written me a letter and got my advice by the next post,” and Mr. Brookes chuckled.

“Yes, Mr. Brookes, it was something so serious that I had to see you in person. I fear there is a screw loose in the succession.”

“Gad, sir, you don't mean that Hetton *was* married after all?”

“No, it's not that. Since my poor friend

Haggard's death, Mr. Brookes, I have been placed in a very difficult position. On his deathbed Haggard desired me to place a box containing letters and certain reminiscences of a bygone intrigue in his wife's hands. There is nothing very extraordinary in that you will say; the man was sorry for his youthful error, and sought forgiveness. Quite so, but that was not the end of the matter." Spunyarn described to the old lawyer the contents of the box, the miniature, the mask, the earrings, and the packet of letters. "Mr. Brookes," he continued, "as my friend's executor it was perhaps my duty to have gone through those letters, but they were the love-letters of a dead woman to my own dead friend, and I myself had at one time, long long ago, been seriously attached to the lady. I hadn't the heart to go through those letters. I see now, that I neglected or avoided what was a very painful duty. I as my friend's executor should have cared

for those letters, verified them, and put them in a place of safety. My only excuse is that my dying friend's words to me were, 'Hand the red morocco box in my safe to my wife, the contents are important; remember my affair at Rome and you will understand them; Georgie must do as she pleases in the matter.' And then he died. I take it, Mr. Brookes, that it was my duty to carry out my dying friend's injunctions. I did carry out those injunctions to the letter, and then I became aware of an astounding thing. Young Lucius Haggard is not the heir to the Pit Town title, for he is illegitimate; nay, more than that, he is not Mrs. Haggard's son at all."

The lawyer sprang from his chair. "Do you mean to assert, Lord Spunyarn, that he was substituted by the supposed parents? On the face of it, Lord Spunyarn, it's an improbable story, almost an impossible story."

"Let me explain, Mr. Brookes. Lucius

Haggard is really the son of Mrs. Haggard's dearest friend. When, in a moment of desperate fear and agitation, in her love for her friend she consented to cover that friend's terrible position—she was an inexperienced girl, Mr. Brookes—by personating the child's mother, she had not the slightest idea of the terrible complications that would ensue, and that the child's father was her own husband ; that latter fact she never knew until my poor friend, suddenly stricken down, with his dying breath hinted at the terrible secret, and asked for her forgiveness."

The lawyer moved uneasily in his chair, but did not attempt to interrupt Lord Spun-yarn's explanation.

"I acknowledge to you, Mr. Brookes," he continued, "that I committed an error ; I should have done at once what I am doing now, and taken you into our confidence. But the good name of a woman was at stake, the proofs were in our possession,

there was no doubt as to the illegitimacy of Lucius Haggard, and I trusted in his honour and to the affection he bore to the woman who had been a mother to him, to enable us to tide over the matter without disclosing it to a living soul, at least during Lord Pit Town's lifetime."

"And you were disappointed, Lord Spun-yarn ; you forgot the magnitude of the stake, when you deliberately placed the honour of a noble family, the succession to a title and immense estates, in the hands of an interloper."

"No, Mr. Brookes. At first Lucius Haggard refused to believe for an instant what would naturally seem a most improbable story. A terrible scene of violence ensued, but let me do young Lucius justice : he speedily came to his senses ; his conduct, Mr. Brookes, was all that one could expect from a man of the very highest honour. He placed himself unreservedly in my hands."

“Thank God for that,” said the lawyer, as he wiped his forehead with his big silk handkerchief, “thank God for that, for it simplifies matters very considerably. And now I suppose you want me to break the matter to the old lord. We’ve had a very narrow escape, Lord Spunyarn.”

“I fear we’re not out of the wood yet,” said Spunyarn meditatively.

“What! further complications?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Mrs. Haggard is suffering from a stroke of paralysis and is speechless.”

“Well, there is still your evidence and the contents of the box; besides, you say that Lucius Haggard will not fail you.”

“Mr. Brookes, the worst yet remains to tell; *the contents of the box have disappeared.*”

Again the lawyer rose to his feet deeply agitated. “Lord Spunyarn,” said he solemnly, “you have much to answer for. No doubt Lucius Haggard has possessed himself of the evidence the box contained

and has destroyed it. Just think for an instant of the immense temptation to him to do so. There may be, there will be, a gigantic law-suit that may never end, while the whole of the vast property may be frittered away, for in a matter such as this, remember, all costs come out of the estate. Lord Spunyarn, what you tell me is not a misfortune, it is an appalling calamity, and Lucius Haggard alone has the key of the situation. It's not a time for half measures, Lord Spunyarn ; we must attempt to obtain from him the contents of the box, even if we have to employ violence."

"Calm yourself, Mr. Brookes," said Lord Spunyarn, "Lucius Haggard at least is wholly guiltless in the matter. He was unaware even of the existence of the box and its contents until he saw it in Mrs. Haggard's presence. We revealed to him the story, and when we opened the box, that he might see the proofs as he surely had a right to do, it was empty."

The lawyer stared at Lord Spunyarn. "And what is your lordship's opinion," he said, "in the matter? Let me understand you exactly, Lord Spunyarn. You handed the box and its contents to Mrs. Haggard. She can testify to that?"

"Mr. Brookes, she is speechless."

"If we had only got the letters you speak of, with affidavits in proper form from yourself and the wife of the deceased man, and, *Lucius Haggard being a consenting party*, by the expenditure of a good deal of money, we might perhaps tide the matter over; as it is, Lord Spunyarn, there is no evidence, absolutely no evidence. All you have to tell, is mere hearsay and conjecture; and it would doubtless be successfully set up that, accepting your version of the communication made to you by Reginald Haggard on his deathbed, unsupported as it is by a tittle of evidence, it was but the incoherent raving of a dying man. A Committee of Privilege of the House of Lords

would not accept mere *ex parte* statements in so serious a matter; there would have to be absolute proof, legal proof, mind you, proof that would satisfy the law officers of the Crown. Young Lucius Haggard, even if he were so Quixotic as to wish to do so, could not sign away an earldom by a mere stroke of the pen, neither could he strip himself of the entailed estates. The extraordinary events, that you say took place many years ago, would have to be proved; and who is to prove them? As to the parties themselves, two of them are dead, while the third unfortunately is unable to give evidence one way or the other. If I communicate this dreadful thing to my aged client, it may actually kill him. What is your own opinion, Lord Spunyarn? Do you suppose that in a temporary aberration of mind, to take a most favourable view of it, Mrs. Haggard, with a woman's natural fear of exposure, destroyed or secreted the contents of the box? Reginald Haggard we

know devised all his property to his son George, which was the least he could do after stripping him of everything he had the right to inherit (I am taking your strange story for gospel for a moment). Can we think that Mrs. Haggard (still supposing the story to be true) felt herself bound to be her husband's accomplice in robbing her own son of his just rights, and so become the principal actor in an abominable conspiracy? You have pieced the thing together in your own mind, and the whole story fits charmingly, but it doesn't admit of proof in any way; it's little better than an improbable and romantic tale as it stands now, without a shadow of documentary or oral evidence to give it even the semblance of truth."

Lord Spunyarn interrupted the lawyer impatiently.

"You don't mean to say that you doubt the various details that I have given you, Mr. Brookes?"

“I doubt nothing, Lord Spunyarn,” replied the lawyer, “I am merely giving you the legal view. It will be my duty, I fear there is no escape from it, to communicate the whole matter to Lord Pit Town, and to take his instructions; of course by those instructions I shall be guided. He may direct me to attempt to collect evidence in the matter, for I don’t suppose that he would wish an illegitimate child of his heir to inherit his title and estates. There is another view, Lord Spunyarn, a view that would commend itself to the minds of some men: ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’ is a good proverb. If Lucius Haggard is, as you assert, base-born, then it is for George Haggard to prove his title; and the real struggle between the two young men need only commence when my old friend is laid in his grave. Of one thing I am quite certain, Lord Spunyarn; public scandal and litigation, must, if possible, be avoided, and I am sure that my client will be at one with me in this.”

Spunyarn nodded.

“It is, of course, possible,” continued the lawyer, “that some third person may have possessed himself of the contents of the box from mercenary motives.”

“And what is your own impression, Mr. Brookes?”

“Speaking to you, Lord Spunyarn, as Reginald Haggard’s executor and the guardian of his infant sons, one of whom is undoubtedly the heir to the Pit Town title, speaking as a man unversed in the ways of women, and supposing that Lucius Haggard was unaware of the alleged contents of the box, I am inclined to suspect that Mrs. Haggard holds the key to the mystery.”

“You mean that she has secreted or destroyed what the box contained?”

The lawyer nodded.

“Mr. Brookes, my poor friend’s wife would never commit a dishonourable act.”

“A woman’s ideas of honour, Lord Spun-

yarn, are peculiar. With them, as a rule, particularly with the best of them, sentiment often takes the place of what men call honour. You yourself have told me that this unhappy lady considered herself bound by an oath to Lucius's mother, accepting for the moment the theory that she herself is not his mother. If she would keep the secret for twenty years, Lord Spunyarn, if there was a secret, she may carry it with her to her grave, repenting the sudden confidence that you state she made to you. Even supposing that the power of speech should return to her, she may decline to confirm upon oath the statement made to you. The very fact of her suffering from paralysis may be used by Lucius Haggard and his advisers to set up a theory that she is of unsound mind ; and a very natural theory, too, I take it," said the lawyer with a sigh. "Lucius Haggard," he continued, "a minor, under the influence which you and Mrs. Haggard would natu-

rally exert upon him, may be a very different person to deal with from Lucius Haggard acting under professional advice, and only biassed by his own interests. I fear, should the matter ever come before the public, that very strong reflections indeed will be made upon you and Mrs. Haggard. *Beati possidentes.* Supposing that Lord Pit Town should elect to either ignore the matter altogether, or simply instruct me to seek for further evidence; in a very short time indeed, for his lordship is a very old man, Lucius Haggard will come into the title and estates as a matter of course; it will then be for George to attempt to prove his right. We must be careful, Lord Spunyarn, in attempting to set ourselves up as an amateur court of law, that we do not ruin the fortunes of a great house by leaving it absolutely without an heir; for suppose young George Haggard to die, and supposing for an instant that the story you have told me could ever be

proved, that is what would happen. Why, the very title would cease to exist, and the estates would possibly revert to the Crown. Are you and I, Lord Spunyarn, justified in setting the match to a train which might extinguish an ancient peerage? If I speak to you as a man of the world, and give you my honest opinion, I do not hesitate to say that the best thing that can happen is, that these papers, whatever they contain, may never come to light."

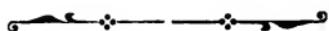
" You would not go as far as to suggest, Mr. Brookes, that should we discover the papers we are to destroy them? "

" No, Lord Spunyarn. God forbid! I don't go as far as that. You, as your friend's executor, through a strange carelessness, for I can call it no less, have let the contents of the box out of your possession; of course it is for you to do your utmost to regain them. If you ever succeed in doing so, it seems to me that young George Haggard will be called upon to elect

his own course. I don't think there is any use in prolonging this interview," he continued; "I must see his lordship, of course, in the morning; and should he consent, and I trust to his strong common sense that he will do so, we shall be able to advise with you in the matter. He may, however, object to that, in which case you will of course obtain professional assistance and take your own course."

Spunyarn felt that the man who addressed him had ceased to be Mr. Brookes, the old friend of the family, and that he had relapsed into his real position of Lord Pit Town's legal adviser.

The two men shook hands; and it is not to be wondered at if neither slept very well that night, both having abundant food for reflection.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE HOLLOW BEECH TREE.

CURIOSITY is not, as is popularly supposed, the private and peculiar failing of the female sex. Most men tear up their letters ere they consign them to the waste-paper basket ; the wiser and more suspicious portion of the human race burn them. If Bluebeard had confided the key of the Blue closet to any one of his servants, we may rely upon it that they would have been just as certain to have investigated the contents, as the nameless, but indiscreet, lady, whose sister's name was Ann.

Mr. Capt was a very superior servant, but like most servants he was innately curious. The little red morocco box, which he had never seen opened, which had always accompanied his deceased master on his numerous journeys, and which was habitually kept

in his master's iron safe, had always puzzled him. It's not very much to be wondered at, then, that when Mr. Capt saw the box upon the table in Mrs. Haggard's boudoir, with its key standing invitingly in the lock, he should seize the opportunity to take a peep at its contents. When Capt saw what those contents were, being an unscrupulous man, he hesitated not an instant in becoming their possessor. With men such as Capt, *chantage*, as the French call it, is a favourite mode of obtaining wealth. We know how Capt had blackmailed Lucy Warrender for years, and how he was a past-master in the art. We know, too, that Capt meditated a still grander *coup*. The secret he possessed had been a little fortune to him during poor Lucy's lifetime, and, like the shares of a successful mine, Mr. Capt's secret had developed in value with astonishing rapidity. But Capt was a timid as well as a cautious man; he had a holy horror of the terrors of the law. The secret he had to sell was a valuable one, it is true,

but the chain of proof was incomplete. Capt could show that the ladies had gone to Auray in a mysterious manner. Capt could swear that Miss Warrender, under the threat of exposure, had made no secret to him that she was the mother of the boy Lucius; but who Lucius's father was, had been to Mr. Capt an impenetrable mystery. And as Mr. Capt rubbed his hands at the thought of the disclosures he could make and their great pecuniary value, his smile of delight would fade at the reflection, that though all he swore might be perfectly true, yet, like the inspired Cassandra, he might fail to find anybody to believe him. Great then was Capt's delight at getting possession of the miniature which represented Lucy Warrender in her Watteau costume, for it opened up to him the means of placing his own evidence beyond a doubt, by adding to it the probably unwilling testimony of Lord Spunyarn, a witness who would be above suspicion. His master's monogram upon the portrait case,

followed by the single word “Rome” and the date, brought back all the facts distinctly to his mind. He remembered actually looking on with his own eyes, disguised as he was as a Roman warrior, upon the *fracas* between Haggard and the unfortunate Mons. Barbiche at Papayani’s ball; he had seen the blue domino upon Haggard’s arm, and he had gazed with curiosity, striving to penetrate the secrecy of the very mask which was now in his possession. Probably, he thought, Lord Spunyarn was Haggard’s confidant in the whole matter, but when he read the packet of letters all doubt was set at rest, and Mr. Capt felt that the honour of a noble family was his to traffic with, and that all that remained was to look out for the best bargain. Mr. Capt then secreted his prey at once. Secure now in the possession of the power of proving what he had to tell, he had but to take his merchandise to the best market and dispose of it to the highest bidder.

Unfortunately for the valet, there were only a few possible purchasers for the valuable commodity he had to sell. There was the old lord, but Capt doubted whether Lord Pit Town might feel disposed to invest his money in proving the eldest son of his own deceased heir to be a bastard. As for Mrs. Haggard, dealings with her were out of the question, for she was prostrated by the stroke of paralysis. Then Capt's mind reverted to old Warrender, but he thought with horror of the collection of antiquated horsewhips which hung in the entrance-hall of The Warren, and he remembered that Squire Warrender, though a very old man now, had a vigorous arm, and that he was a justice of the peace. The other possible purchasers that remained were the two young men, but unfortunately both were under age, and, therefore, comparatively penniless; so Mr. Capt, reluctantly enough, was compelled to defer negotiations to Lord Pit Town's death, or, at all events,

until Lucius Haggard's majority, and he determined whichever of those events might happen first, that he would then realize his property at once.

Capt had reluctantly made up his mind to wait; he carefully packed up the contents of the little box which he had purloined, including the brilliant earrings, for he feared to dispose of them, though they were very valuable, lest he might be accused of, and punished for, a robbery. Besides the earrings were a part of the proofs. It was quite a neat little parcel he made, and he carefully covered the whole with waterproof canvas, lest the valuable contents of the packet might be damaged by weather. Mr. Capt had determined to place his property in a temporary hiding place, for he argued rightly that Lord Spunyarn, as soon as he was aware of the robbery that had been committed, would leave no stone unturned to regain possession of the deposit he had so carelessly guarded.

Nature had provided Mr. Capt with a hiding-place suitable in every way to his designs. In the most secluded portion of the park, whither he was accustomed to resort to meditate and smoke his master's cigars in secret, was a very picturesque beech. At about the height of a man in the trunk of this vigorous young tree was a hole some eighteen inches deep, just large enough to admit a man's hand. Into this natural hiding-place Mr. Capt remembered to have once himself thrust his fingers from curiosity. It was not without some hesitation that he placed his property in the cavity, and to make assurance doubly sure he covered the packet with a few dead leaves and closed the mouth of the hole with a big stone, upon which he artistically placed a little layer of living moss, carefully smoothing down the edges of the tuft with his fingers. And then Mr. Capt became once more a waiter upon Providence.

The explosion which Mr. Capt had

expected took place. The sudden summoning of the family lawyer, and the striking down of Mrs. Haggard by paralysis, had sufficiently informed him of the fact. He felt certain that a vigorous perquisition would ensue, and it was with considerable satisfaction, that he reflected that he had been beforehand in the matter, and that he had placed, what he looked upon as his property, in safety.

The interview between Lord Pit Town and his solicitor was a long one. The old lord was naturally much agitated. As was to be expected, he placed himself unreservedly in the hands of his legal adviser, and he determined not to move in the matter.

“You seem to think, Brookes,” he said, “that there is nothing to be done in this thing.”

“Certainly not, my lord,” Mr. Brookes replied. “The late Mr. Reginald Haggard’s widow, should she recover possession of her

faculties, which her medical adviser has informed me is extremely doubtful, would be able assuredly to give us the solution of the mystery; till then, or till her death, it is my opinion that we can take no action whatever. It is certainly not for us to throw any doubt upon the legitimacy of the young man, whom you must perforce continue to look upon as your lawful heir. Of Lucius Haggard's silence for his own sake, we may be certain. Lord Spunyarn we may trust, while Mrs. Haggard herself will assuredly reveal nothing until her health is in some measure restored, and then only probably under considerable pressure from you, if you should, under the circumstances, consider such a course advisable. If there really was a secret, Lord Pit Town, we can rely upon the discretion of a woman who has kept it for twenty years. But after all it seems to me that it is only the distant branches of the family who suffer in losing a remote contingent succession;

even if the extremely unlikely history which Lord Spunyarn gave me is a fact, and true in all its details, Lucius Haggard is still Reginald Haggard's son. It seems to me that it is not for us to stir up the question of his legitimacy. Possibly your lordship might feel inclined to put pressure upon him, and make him covenant not to marry in his younger brother George's lifetime, and so the title and entailed estates would eventually pass to George Haggard or his heirs."

"That is, of course, supposing the story to be true," quavered the old lord.

"It is impossible, my lord, in the absence of the documents, for us to take any notice of the story. I may attempt, if you wish it, to obtain information. I might sound the late Mr. Haggard's valet, though I think it would be extremely bad policy to do so. As for George Haggard, my lord, he is his father's heir, and you and I, my lord, know that the present disposition of your

lordship's property will amply compensate him for the loss of the Pit Town title and the Walls End estates, even if they were really his by right."

"Yes, Brookes, I suppose things must take their course."

His lordship's remark showed that he accepted Mr. Brookes' point of view. The lawyer communicated the old man's decision to Lord Spunyarn, but the matter itself was never mentioned between Lord Pit Town and the executor of his late heir.

Young Lucius Haggard for the last few days had had plenty of food for reflection. The agony of mind which he had suffered when Lord Spunyarn had broken to him the strange story of his birth was more than counterbalanced by the disappearance of the proofs and the opportune illness of his father's widow. He found himself once more the heir apparent, and so temporary had been his degradation that it seemed but a fevered dream. Whether

the story was true or false, probably no one would ever know. The more he thought of the matter, the more young Lucius Haggard congratulated himself on having controlled his feelings after his first natural burst of passionate indignation. He had not alienated Lord Spunyarn, he had not quarrelled with any one; his conduct, under the most trying circumstances, had been such as to merit the respect of all concerned. Though he had not yet won the rubber, he had decidedly scored the first game.

As time rolled on, Reginald Haggard's widow made no perceptible progress towards recovery. The speechlessness continued; she was still unable to articulate. At first she frequently attempted to speak, but gradually ceased her efforts, as she found that it was practically impossible to express herself. When she tried to write, although the fingers could grasp the pen, she was unable to produce written characters, but she ap-

peared to hear and to understand perfectly. Her memory, too, seemed to have failed her, for she no longer attempted to express her grief at her husband's death. She had lost to a certain extent also the power of motion, and was confined to her couch. With this exception, her bodily health remained good, and there was no visible change in her appearance.

No intimation of the supposed discovery of a family mystery had been made to old Squire Warrender, not that there was any doubt as to his discretion, but simply because there was nothing to be gained by disturbing the old man's mind with so terrible a communication. Squire Warrender had hurried to the Castle to visit his daughter when he first heard of her seizure; but as the fears of an immediate fatal termination gradually wore off, the old squire had returned to King's Warren. But the two young men, as was natural, still remained at the Castle in close attend-

ance upon their mother ; George, from natural affection, while Lucius, though he longed to taste the sweets of his newly-acquired liberty, felt that it was to his interest to remain upon the spot in the unlikely contingency of Mrs. Haggard regaining her faculties.

While the minds of many of the inhabitants of Walls End Castle had been disturbed in the manner narrated, the quiet little parish of King's Warren had been shaken out of its ordinary state of somniferous torpidity. To use Mrs. Dodd's words, "the government of the country had at last become awakened to the important services rendered to the Church by my dear father." The fact is, that a bishopric had fallen in, and that the Prime Minister, a notorious talker and time-server, and a very old servant of Her Majesty, was extremely anxious to perpetrate a great and glorious job. But the Prime Minister was a wise man ; he knew very well that in trying

to please everybody he would satisfy no one, and so he meant to please himself, and to appoint to the vacant see an old college chum of his own, a learned but harmless enthusiast, now a Don, who had once in his life perpetrated a very abstruse work upon the Greek particle. The first thing that the Prime Minister did was to lend an apparently willing ear to the suggestions of the various busybodies who under such circumstances always favour unfortunates in his position with their disinterested ideas upon the subject. Deputations from the two rival missionary societies waited upon him, lords temporal and lords spiritual had private interviews with him, and the heads of his party expressed their opinions to him freely but confidentially ; he promised to give their suggestions what he called his earnest consideration, and then he bowed them out. But the Prime Minister was a man who invariably killed two birds with one stone. “I will obtain some cheap

popularity," he thought, "and several good rounds of universal applause, by a master-stroke. I will *offer* the bishopric to a simple parish clergyman." In the clerical world, to use a profane phrase, there were at least half-a-dozen favourites in the betting, and as many dark horses. When the *Thunderer* appeared with an inspired article upon the fitness of a successful parish clergyman for the more onerous position of a bishop, great was the humming and disturbance in the clerical hive. Profound was the disappointment in the minds of the drones and dignitaries. Men who were performing archidiaconal functions heaped dust and ashes on their heads, crying aloud that the interests of the Church were being sacrificed to obtain an ephemeral popularity. But the breasts of the working bees throbbed with excitement; the vicars of parishes who had been long in harness, and had never met with the expensive misfortune of being haled by their bishop, or the terrible ag-

grieved parishioner, under the Church Discipline Act, before that greatest of all clerical bogies, Lord Penzance, and who would never have thought of undergoing six months' imprisonment for conscience' sake ; men who knew a good glass of wine when they saw it ; men who were apostles of the Blue Ribbon Army, fathers of large families of sons and daughters blessed in having their quivers full of them, and Celibates wedded to the Church alone ; all these men were racked by ambitious hopes. In the meanwhile the Prime Minister was occupied in putting salt on his sparrow's tail : that rare clerical bird so fast becoming extinct in the present day, *rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno*, who should be willing to reply to him *nolo episcopari*. The Prime Minister was looking round for a man of straw, and after some search he found him in the person of the Reverend John Dodd.

The *Thunderer* had said that "the little leaven that was needed in the hierarchy

of the Church of England, that it might leaven the whole lump, was a parochial clergyman who had unostentatiously laboured in the clerical vineyard, a man who could rule his see as he had ruled his parish," and after a long diatribe, the article concluded with these pregnant words: "Such a man the noble lord at the head of affairs has found in the well-known vicar of King's Warren, the Reverend John Dodd." And then it compared the Reverend John Dodd to the "Man of Ross," in its usual graceful and pointed manner.

Verbal communications, like dead men, tell no tales.

The Prime Minister didn't write a letter to the Reverend John Dodd, he didn't even send him a halfpenny post-card, offering him the bishopric; but he did dispatch a trusted emissary. We must remember that the Minister had been credibly informed that the Reverend John Dodd was absolutely the only respectable clergyman

in the Church of England, in the full possession of his mental faculties, who would be certain to decline the honours of consecration. Certain Roman emperors have earned our respect by refusing to accept divine honours, and the Prime Minister heard with delight that the Reverend John Dodd was a man of the same heroic kidney. We have met the emissary before, it was the same old clerical friend of the Reverend John's, who had on a previous occasion, as his archdeacon, warned him to set his house in order on the appointment of a new bishop, a king who knew not Joseph. He it was, who had recommended to his friend Dodd that eminently reliable clerical charwoman, the Reverend Barnes Puffin. The Reverend Barnes Puffin had done his work well, things had gone on smoothly ever since in the parish of King's Warren; and many a time and oft had the stout vicar, like the mask'd Arabian maid in the "Light of the

Harem," exclaimed, "Oh, if there be an Elysium on earth, it is this, it is this." I don't believe that the vicar of King's Warren would have changed places with the Mikado of Japan. The two clergymen had their interview; at which Mrs. Dodd, to her great indignation, did not assist. Never before in his life had the Reverend John kept a secret so long from the knowledge of the wife of his bosom, the fair Cecilia; until the next morning at breakfast, he may be said to have continuously wrestled with her in the spirit. In vain did Mrs. Dodd alternately beg, command, and even entreat him with briny tears, to communicate to her what had taken place in that secret interview. All she could extract from him was, that she should know all about it at breakfast time. She even tried guessing, but each guess was more wildly improbable, and wider of the mark than the last; her final suggestion was a rather barbed arrow though.

“John,” she said in a hissing whisper, with a vicious nudge, to the poor vicar, who was vainly seeking sleep for the twentieth time. “You may keep it from me if you will, John, but I’ve guessed your dreadful secret. Yes,” she added with a succession of sobs, “I’ve guessed it at last; the boo-boo-bishop is going to sequestrate your living on the ground of your weakened intellect.” But Dodd only chuckled, or rather “chortled,” in his amusement, as he buried his face in his pillow.

The next morning Mrs. Dodd, as was her custom, entered the breakfast-room first. She took up the *Thunderer*, and she performed her natural duty as a woman, and went carefully through the list of births, deaths and marriages; and then she came upon the inspired article to which we have alluded. At first the paper dropped from her fingers, and then her face was illumined by a smile of triumph.

The neat parlourmaid was just placing the hissing urn upon the table.

“Jane,” said Mrs. Dodd, “in future when addressing your master, be good enough to say, ‘my lord.’ You can inform the others of what I wish done.”

The girl dropped Mrs. Dodd a low courtesy, stared at her, and then stammered out, “Yes, my lady.”

So grateful was this speech to Mrs. Dodd’s feelings that she hadn’t the heart to correct the girl; she merely smiled blandly and smoothed her cap ribbons.

The Reverend John Dodd entered the room at the moment; he sniffed and rubbed his hands, for ambrosial odours from the kitchen reached his nostrils. His wife sprang to her feet, and rushing into his arms after the manner of long-lost daughters upon the stage, she buried her face in his M.B. waistcoat. “John, dear John,” she said through her tears of joy, as she gazed up at his great round smiling visage,

“let me be the first to congratulate you on your well-deserved honours.” She snatched up the newspaper and waved it wildly in the air. “I’ve read it all, John, and they’ve put it *so* nicely. Little did I dream last night when I spoke to you so irreverently, for I shall revere you now, John, that I was speaking to a bishop. Oh, John,” she continued, clapping her hands in a girlish manner, “’tis such a becoming dress, and so, so delightfully exclusive.”

“Calm yourself, Cecilia,” said Dodd, who feared the shock would be too much for her. “Calm yourself, Cecilia, dear. I’m plain Jack Dodd still; they did offer it me yesterday, but I refused it.”

“And you can stand there, Mr. Dodd, and tell me this dreadful thing. Oh, Mr. Dodd,” she said with withering sarcasm, “I thought just now that I was the wife of a bishop. Alas, I learn from your lips the terrible truth, the truth which my poor

father so often impressed upon me, that I am only married to a fool," and she rushed from the room.

I suppose that the parson was after all a callous stony-hearted man, for though he breakfasted alone, he devoured the entire dish of stewed kidneys, which the parlour-maid had placed upon the table with a low obeisance.



CHAPTER IX.

MR. CAPT LEAVES SERVICE.

MR. CAPT bided his time. The quiet respectful foreign servant showed by no word or gesture that he held the key to the mystery of Lucius Haggard's birth. His duties were almost a sinecure, and though now he drew his pay from Lucius Haggard, and was, of course, young Mr. Haggard's own man, yet he gave almost as much attention to the comforts of the younger brother. Every afternoon Mr. Capt was in the habit of taking a long walk in the great park. I don't think it was simply for love of exercise, or to admire the scenery, that he was so regular in his pilgrimages to a particular sylvan glade on the border of the river Sweir, which formed the extreme boundary of Lord Pit

Town's home park. The real fact was, that Capt was in the habit of making a daily inspection of the place where he had deposited his treasure. At first he was accustomed to walk down to the river and examine the little tuft of moss which he had so carefully planted over the hiding-place furnished him by nature in the beech tree. But he had noticed that he had worn quite a little path just beneath his tiny treasure-house; such carelessness he remembered might betray him; so though he passed the tree every day, he was careful to avoid his first mistake; and as day by day the little tuft of moss grew greener, for it had now evidently taken root, Capt gradually inspected the tree just as carefully but from a greater distance. From many a point of vantage he could observe the little green patch, and at length, by a refinement of ingenuity, he was enabled to keep away from the tree altogether. His eternal cigar in his

mouth, he was accustomed to walk about well within sight of the beech tree. The spot was secluded enough when he had first adopted the hiding-place, but as the autumn wore on and the leaves fell, Mr. Capt thanked his stars at his own ingenuity. Having assured himself that no one was in sight, Mr. Capt would take a small opera glass from his pocket, then he would commence by its aid to admire the view, he would gaze round at all points of the compass; last of all, his glance would inevitably fall upon the beech tree, the glass would be fixed steadily upon the little tuft of moss, and then seeing that it was undisturbed it would be replaced in its case, and pocketed with a sigh of satisfaction. And then Mr. Capt would continue his perambulations in a comfortable frame of mind.

It was one of those bright, brisk, clear days of early winter, when the sun has attained sufficient power to make us un-

button our overcoats, and feel glad if we had left our neck-wraps at home. Mr. Capt had just breasted the rising ground which formed the boundary of the dell in the direction of the Castle. He stopped, and placed his hand in his pocket, to draw from it the glass, and to then commence his usual artistic studies of the thousand and one autumn effects of the daily changing landscape. But before he could get the glass to his eye, he perceived a figure standing at the edge of the little swirling river. There was plenty of water in the Sweir just now, as it swept through the rich soft mould here, where it formed the boundary of the home park. Robinson Crusoe's gesture of disgust and fear, when he saw the first savage upon his island home, was very similar to that made by Mr. Capt when he discerned the tall figure of Blogg, the head keeper, leaning upon his gun. Robinson Crusoe was a pious Englishman, as we know, but Capt being

an irreligious foreigner, gave vent to his feelings in a continental oath. The keeper's back was towards Capt, and his eyes were fixed upon the fast-hurrying waters of the swollen stream ; the valet, though he was a good six hundred yards off, retraced his steps upon tip-toe in his great anxiety not to attract the keeper's attention. When he was well out of sight, having put the rising ground once more between himself and Blogg, he lighted a cigar, and recommenced his walk, making a long circuit, but as if drawn by some irresistible magnetism, his feet once more, ere the cigar was finished, brought him to the banks of the Sweir and the entrance to the dell. This time Mr. Capt was not so fortunate, for the keeper's eyes met his the instant he made his appearance. The fact is that Blogg had been standing chewing the cud of his reflections, or possibly thinking about nothing at all, during the five and twenty minutes' circuit that Capt had

made. There is a considerable difference in position between a head keeper and his master's valet. Blogg recognized the fact, for though he didn't touch his hat to Capt, he didn't presume to shake hands with him, and he addressed him with marked deference.

“Mornin', sir,” he said.

“Good morning, Mr. Blogg,” replied the valet affably ; “on duty, I suppose.”

“Lor' bless you, a keeper's always on duty ; leastways a head keeper is.”

The two men walked along amicably side by side.

“I daresay it seems to you,” continued Blogg, “more like loafing than duty, for me to go mouching round the best part of the day, aye, and at times the best part of the night, too, with this here gun. Not that we're troubled much with poachers here about, they're mostly amytoors here, but they're as full o' tricks as a bag full o' monkeys. I'm mostly a match for 'em

you know, for I was a regular myself once, as you can remember. Ah, many's the dark night as I went out a-wirin' in King's Warren parish. I don't know as there weren't more enjymant in those days. We were both younger then, Muster Capt," said the keeper with a sigh.

"Ah, but think of your position now," said Capt, who wished to put the man in a good humour, that he might all the sooner shake him off.

"Position ain't everything. A head keeper's life is as anxious a time as a frog's in a frying-pan, a hot frying-pan, ye mind me; it's not all tips and perquisites; it's information here and information there, it's night lines in the river and the lake, its wirin' and steel trappin', when it ain't ferrettin' and fish-pison, and what with the boys as cums after the antlers and the nestes, and the children as cums after the blackberries, and the radicals as keeps a dog, a man's hands is very full indeed."

"You must have an anxious time," said the sympathizing Capt.

"Ah, you may well say that," replied the keeper; "why, in my young days the boys they cum after the nestes, and the men they cum after the game, as is perhaps natural after all, but now they cums after everything. They even grubs up the ferns and the primroses with irons made a-purpose. Why, one of they fern chaps would think nothing of clearing half an acre in a mornin'. They comes after the butterflies with their nets, and a botanizing with their tin candle boxes, and trespassin' comes natural to them. Why, only the other day I caught a feller bottling mud out of a pond, and a-catchin' newts and such like. 'What's your business here?' I said. 'I'm collecting quattic animals,' said he. 'And I suppose you've got permission?' 'Don't you be insolent, my man,' he said; and he shakes his finger at me, for all the world like the Sunday-

school teacher used to shake his finger at me when I was a little bit of a chap. ‘Don’t you try to stop the march of science, my man,’ says he. ‘I don’t care nothin’ about the march of science,’ says I; ‘but if you don’t hand over the pair of antlers as you’ve got up your back, I’ll wallop you, master. And after I’ve walloped you, you and science can march where you please.’ But what makes my life a burden to me,’ continued the keeper, still airing his grievances, “is vermin.”

Capt started.

“What with the weasels, the stoats, and such-like, a man need have his eyes open.”

“Yes,” said Capt; “you need all your powers of observation, I suppose.”

“You’re right there,” assented the keeper; “it ain’t much as escapes me.”

By this time they had reached the middle of the glen, and were within a dozen paces of Mr. Capt’s secret store-house. Greatly to the valet’s disgust the keeper

now produced a lump of tobacco from his pocket, and commenced with his knife to carefully shred off the quantity necessary for filling his pipe; he stopped to satisfactorily complete the delicate operation, then, with great care, he lighted the little black clay cutty. The keeper got his pipe into full swing, the two men were about to proceed on their walk, but Blogg suddenly laid his hand on the valet's arm and pointed at the beech tree.

“It's many a man,” he said sententiously, “as would walk by that tree and see nothing particular about it,” and he stared at the tree in curiosity. “Aren't you well, Muster Capt?” he said suddenly, as the expression on the valet's face attracted his attention.

The valet's countenance had become of an ashen grey, and drops of perspiration stood upon his brow as he seized the keeper's arm.

“I am feeling very queer,” he said.

“You look as if you'd seen a ghost,”

said his friendly fellow-servant. "Take a pull at that," said Blogg, producing a small flask from one of the capacious pockets of his moleskin coat. "I'll get ye a drop of water," he continued, removing the little metal cup from the bottom of the flask.

Half-a-dozen strides brought the keeper to the banks of the Sweir, but getting the cup full of water was not such a very easy matter. The keeper flung himself upon the turf at the edge of the rapidly running stream, but ere he did so he took the precaution to stamp, with one foot in advance, upon the edge. The reason he did this was obvious, for the soft bank was undercut by the rush of waters. He filled the little cup, and returned with it to his companion, incidentally remarking, "The banks are plaguy dangerous just here. Do ye feel better now?" he said with solicitude.

"Yes, I'm better now," said the valet.

“ You look uncommon bad,” returned the sympathetic keeper.

“ And I feel so, Blogg,” the other replied ; “ give me your arm, I must lean on something. I think I’ll get home at once.”

“ Just an instant, Muster Capt,” said the keeper ; “ there’s some artful game or other been a-doin’ with that beech ; some chap has gone and plugged the hole of it with a lump of moss ; as like as not he’s got a shopful of wires there now. I’ll just put my hand in and find out what they’ve been up to with it.”

“ Get me home first, Blogg, if you can,” hurriedly interrupted the valet, clutching his arm. “ I feel,” said he, with simulated anxiety, “ I feel as if I were going to die.”

“ I won’t keep ye a minute, Capt, but duty’s duty,” answered Blogg.

“ Don’t be a fool, man,” cried the valet in an authoritative tone ; “ there are seven days in the week, and you can search

the hole, if there is a hole, to-morrow as well as to-day."

But Blogg was an obstinate man. "You're woundy masterful, Capt, for a man who thinks he's a-dying," said the keeper with an honest laugh. "I'll see what's in the hole; and then, if you ask me, why, I'll carry you to the Castle pick-a-pack, if you like." And then Blogg marched up to the beech tree and picked the moss away from the hole. He removed the stone, and turning to the valet, with a triumphant guffaw he cried, "I told 'ee so, Muster Capt. I said as how there was a game going on," and then he plucked the little packet from its hiding-place.

Maurice Capt was a determined man. Should he allow the cherished plan of twenty years to be ruined by the curiosity of a clod? The packet was in the keeper's hands. Like Alnaschar's dream of wealth, all the valet's plans and schemings, all his fondest hopes of affluence, would be kicked

down in an instant. He well knew the dogged honesty of the man; the packet, now within the keeper's grasp, was as good as in Lord Pit Town's hands. All this passed through his mind in the twinkling of an eye, and as the keeper flung himself once more upon the ground, the Swiss valet advanced over the soft turf towards his prostrate form with noiseless cat-like step. Maurice Capt had made up his mind. He flung himself upon the keeper's throat with the ferocity of a tiger, and proceeded to attempt to throttle his adversary from behind. But the keeper was a powerful man. Although Capt's long fingers were tightly fixed upon his windpipe, and the astonished man was taken at a great disadvantage, yet the keeper did his best to rid himself of the remorseless adversary who was savagely attempting to strangle the life out of him. He couldn't call for help, and he didn't attempt it; but he struggled bravely, he drove his heavy

boots into the soft turf, and succeeded once even in rising to his knees, only to be forced back again upon his face by the furious efforts of the Swiss. Blogg's eyes were nearly starting from his head, and his mouth literally foamed, from the cruel tightening grip upon his throat. But the force of his muscular fingers, which wrenched in vain at the iron wrists of the valet, began to relax. Even a strong man cannot fight long when deprived of air. As the light of triumph came into the valet's eyes, for he felt that slowly but surely he was choking the very life out of his victim, the vengeance of heaven suddenly overtook the aggressor. The overhanging bank of soft earth all at once gave way; assailant and assailed, and the very earth they struggled on, fell with a dull splash into the rushing stream.

Yet another few seconds, and the long lithe fingers of the Swiss would have com-

pleted their deadly work. As he felt himself falling, he relaxed his grasp of the keeper's throat, in the natural instinct of self-preservation. Before his mouth reached the water, the hapless Blogg got one great draught of air into his capacious chest, but Capt had too nearly effected his work, and the keeper was practically almost insensible. The only effect of this last breath of life, that chance, and not the mercy of his adversary, had given him, was to make his muscular fingers clutch the struggling wrists of his murderer with a more vice-like grasp. The assailant and assailed had now changed places as they sank beneath the black waters. The valet's sole efforts now were directed to escape from the tenacious grip of the still struggling man. As well might a cur attempt to shake off an infuriated bull-dog who had once fixed his remorseless fangs in his throat. They sank beneath the waters, and, still violently struggling, reappeared again and again as they were spun round

and round by the rushing stream. But not for long.

The little packet escaped from Blogg's fingers and floated rapidly away down the stream. The would-be murderer sunk to the muddy bottom dead, and honest Blogg struck out and scrambled up the bank of the rushing Sweir.

“Blame me,” he cried, as he shook himself like a great water dog, “blame me if I don't think Muster Capt went clean mad; why, he nigh on strangled me,” and then he stared at the hurrying, rushing waters. “Poor chap, he have gone to his account. I wonder what was in that little bundle though!”

* * * * *

The dark waters of the Sweir have closed for ever over the crafty wretch who had so lately held the destinies of a noble family within his grasp. Poor Lucy's secret has disappeared for ever beneath the raging waters of the little river. The oath that Lucy

Warrender extracted from her cousin at the Villa Lambert more than twenty years ago will have been kept but too well, and the secret will probably remain for ever undiscovered. And will young George Haggard be any the worse, seeing that he is robbed of his birthright? We know that Lord Pit Town's will has practically made him a very wealthy man. The mills of heaven's justice grind slowly perhaps at times, but they go on turning and grinding for ever. Lucius Haggard, who in his black and bitter heart knows that he is but an undetected impostor, may never marry, may even predecease the half-brother who was born in lawful wedlock. She, the silent invalid, may yet perhaps speak, or the hollow beech tree may perchance give up its secret.

* * * * *

Many things can happen in a couple of years. To-day the old lord and the German doctor still chat and doze in the great picture galleries; and George's mother,

beautiful still in life's sad evening, yet wonders whether she shall ever meet again in another world the dead husband who betrayed her, but whom she has forgiven long ago. As she lies on her sofa in the pretty room heavy with the scent of flowers, which has been hers for many a long year, her eye brightens, and the soft colour comes back momentarily to the pale cheek, as she hears the manly step of her dear son George; her own son, her very own son, her best beloved.

He is dressed in deepest mourning; and he wears it for Lucius Haggard, the man who would have robbed him of his birth-right.

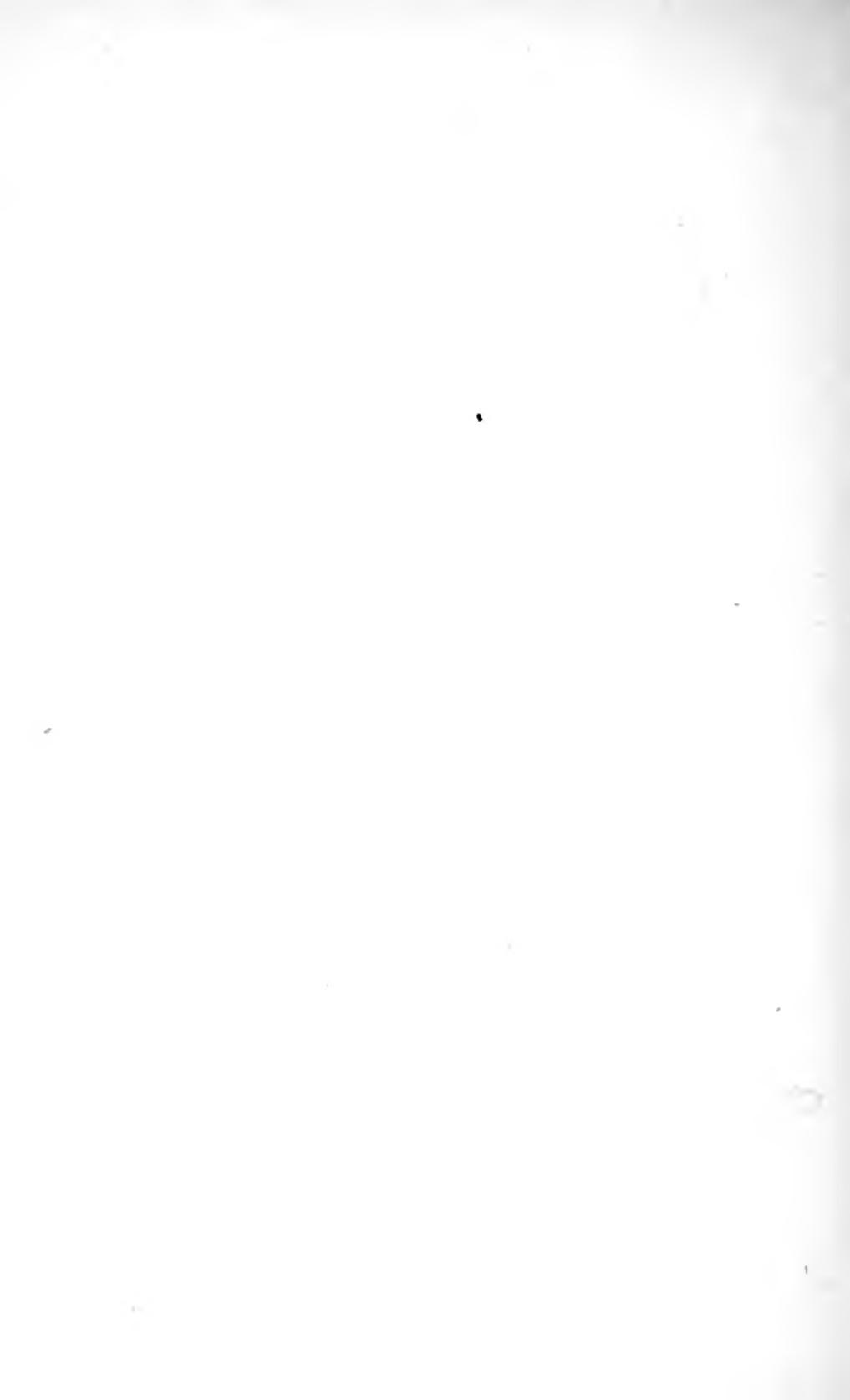
“Mother! dear mother!” he says, as he gently takes her hand.

There is no more to tell. And now the prompter claps his hand upon his little bell, and down comes the green curtain upon the drama of human love, of human passion, selfishness and greed, upon the

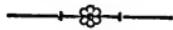
end of the family mystery with which it has been the author's privilege to try and interest the reader.

THE END.

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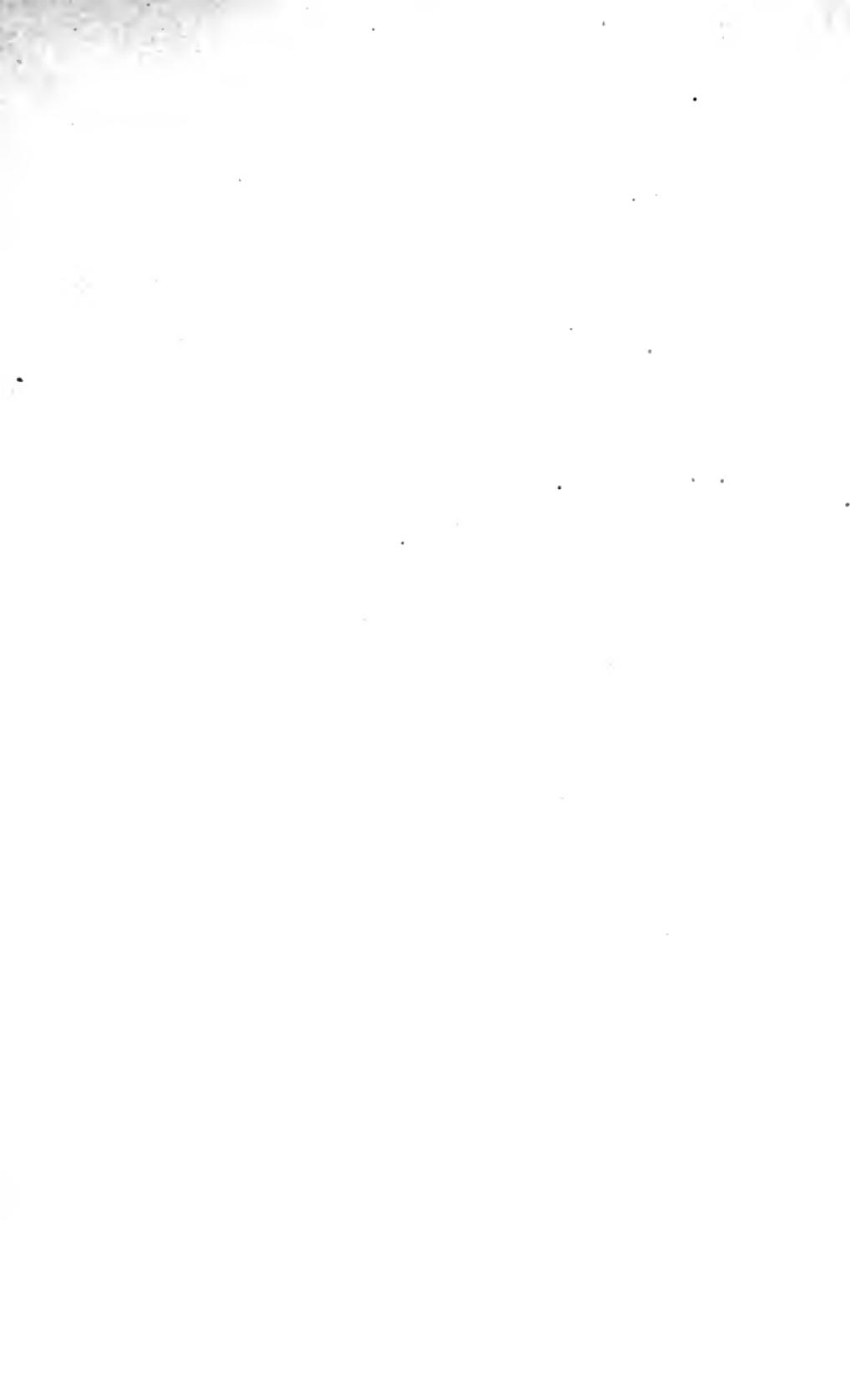
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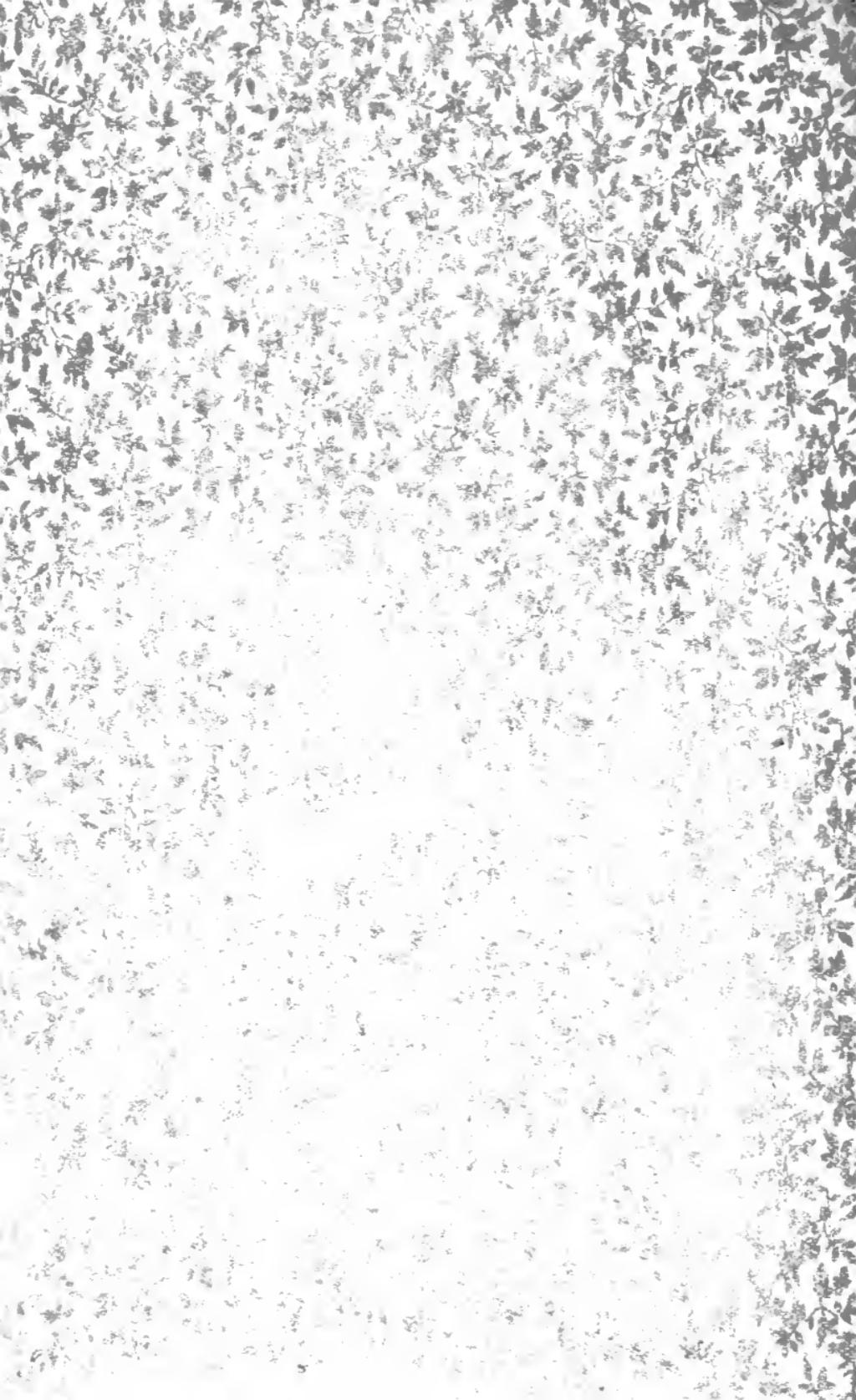
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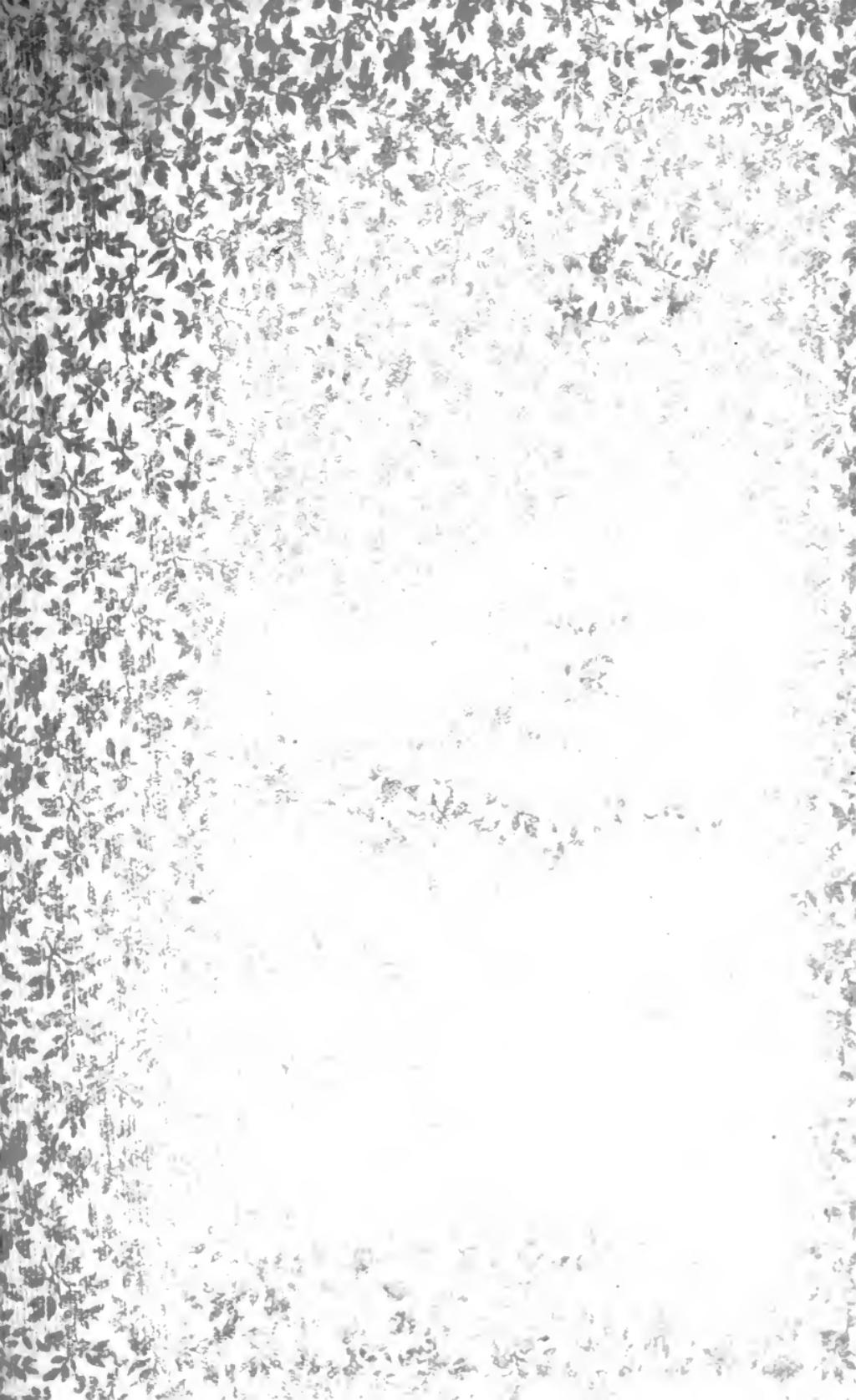
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